

THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

Curriculum-based professional learning

A magnifying glass with a black handle and frame is positioned over the pages of an open book. The book's pages are white and fanned out, creating a sense of depth and focus. The background is a solid, bright yellow.

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October 2024, Vol. 45, No. 5

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Consultant, North Manchester, IN

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2024 KEYNOTE PRESENTERS



Frederick Brown



Juliana Urtubey



A.J. Juliani

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"Professional learning serves as the main bridge between curriculum change and effective practice. Implementing new teaching approaches and content can be complex, especially when these changes counter deeply ingrained inequitable instructional policies and behaviors. Educators need more than just new textbooks and updated course titles — we need comprehensive support to sustain best practices and adapt to the changing needs of our students and the evolving nature of research."

— Source: bit.ly/3BBbdT9

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teacher growth
and student
learning.**



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Leading professional learning



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Coaching individuals and teams



Selecting learning designs

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, senior vice president, professional services, at sharron.helmke@learningforward.org



Curriculum-based professional learning challenges us to consider what it means to engage as an active learner, developing understanding and making meaning.

Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is editor-in-chief of *The Learning Professional*.

HERE WE GO

Suzanne Bouffard

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

For the past five years, one of *The Learning Professional's* most popular articles has been a piece from December 2018 called “Teaching is an art — and a science” (Bouffard, 2018).

The piece, and the issue in which it appeared, were part of Learning Forward’s commitment to increasing the emphasis on curriculum and instructional materials in our work, a shift that we have maintained in the ensuing years.

The article began: “Is teaching an art or a science? It’s a little of both. There is artistry in the way teachers connect with students and foster their understanding. At the same time, there is a science to teaching and learning, an evidence base on which to build our approaches to developing students’ knowledge, skills, and competencies.”

That balance of art and science that so strongly resonates with educators is at the core of curriculum-based professional learning, the term we now use to describe educator learning that is grounded in high-quality instructional materials and the principles of high-quality professional learning.

Over the past five years, we’ve found that curriculum-based professional learning is sometimes misunderstood as an effort to script teachers’ every move or to decrease teachers’ agency to address diverse student needs. In practice, curriculum-based professional learning is a way of supporting educators’ deep understanding of curriculum and ability to apply it with both integrity and responsiveness to students. It helps teachers hone the artistry and science of excellent instruction that leads to rigorous and equitable learning.

Educators come to new curricula with varied backgrounds and expertise, often with little experience facilitating the inquiry, critical thinking, and meaning-making that characterize today’s highly rated curricula. Professional learning that mirrors those qualities can build educators’ expertise regardless of their previous exposure or career stage.

Articles throughout this issue illustrate what it looks like when educators engage in experiential collaborative professional learning around curricula. They show how professional learning supports teachers, principals, principal supervisors, coaches, and district leaders as skilled, empowered facilitators of student learning. They also describe how to build systems that make this kind of professional learning — and, ultimately, high-quality instruction — the norm.

A common thread across these initiatives is that educators take the role of learners. Curriculum-based professional learning challenges us to consider what it means to engage as an active learner, developing understanding and making meaning. One way it does this is by inviting educators to assume the role of student so they experience the lessons, strategies, and materials just as their students will. Putting on the “student hat” shifts educators’ perspectives on the curriculum content and how to teach it in ways that develop student understanding.

At a time when educator morale is troublingly low, Learning Forward believes that curriculum-based professional learning — when done well and in alignment with the Standards for Professional Learning — can refuel educators’ excitement about teaching and learning.

Most importantly, we see how it leads to improvements for students. Those changes don’t come from simply purchasing a box of materials. They come from educators learning together to combine the art and science of teaching to ensure that all students benefit from high-quality curriculum and instruction.

REFERENCE

Bouffard, S. (2018, December). Teaching is an art — and a science. *The Learning Professional*, 39(6), 5. ■

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INSPIRE. EXPRESS. ADVOCATE.

VOICES

An illustration of a person with a backpack standing on a path that leads to a large, open book. The book is positioned as if it's a doorway or a bridge over a wavy, teal landscape. The sky is light green with a few white clouds. The overall style is clean and modern.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN IMPLEMENTING NEW CURRICULUM

“When implementing a new curriculum, it is natural to think first about the needs of teachers on the front line of instruction. However, to effectively support them, we must focus on leaders as well,” writes assistant superintendent Ayesha Farag (p. 14). This issue’s columnists highlight how to support principals, principal supervisors, and other leaders through curriculum-based professional learning.



Curriculum-based professional learning brings the meaning of job-embedded to life because it is integrally connected to what happens in the classroom.

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

CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM GO HAND IN HAND

When Learning Forward revised the Standards for Professional Learning in 2022, we added the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard (Learning Forward, 2022), in

part due to the accumulating evidence about the importance of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials. As we noted in the research brief released alongside the revised standards (Foster, 2022), several studies pointed to the power of grounding professional learning in high-quality instructional materials, with results including

improvements in teacher practices and student achievement (e.g., Taylor et al., 2015).

The Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard includes the key constructs that professional learning should prioritize high-quality instructional materials and support educators to understand them and implement them successfully. A meta-analysis conducted by American Institutes for Research found a statistically significant correlation between these activities and behaviors and positive changes in educator practice and student achievement (Garrett et al., 2021).

Implied in the standard and inherent in the research that drives it is the job-embedded nature of professional learning. Learning Forward is proud to have helped incorporate the term “job-embedded” into the United States’ federal definition of professional learning. Job-embedded means that professional learning is ongoing (not a one-time event), is part of educators’ workday responsibilities, and occurs in or connected to their work. Effective curriculum-based professional learning brings the meaning of job-embedded to life because it is integrally connected to what happens in the classroom. Educators participate actively and over time, often engaging in the curriculum lessons themselves as learners before implementing them with students.

As with all of the Standards for Professional Learning, the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard applies across levels and roles. As you’ll see in this issue, curriculum-based professional learning can occur districtwide or school-based and at the building, grade, or subject-area team level.

In particular, I want to call your attention to the role of leaders. Effective curriculum-based professional learning, like any high-quality professional learning, cannot flourish in a leadership vacuum, as our Leadership standard articulates. That standard speaks to the importance of leaders establishing a compelling and inclusive vision for professional learning, sustaining coherent support to build educator capacity, and advocating for professional learning by sharing the importance and evidence of impact of professional learning.

If leaders don’t understand the important role high-quality curricula and instructional materials play in professional learning and student success, they are unlikely to create the conditions in their districts or schools to support it. As articles in this issue of *The Learning Professional* show, leaders benefit from participating as learners, just as teachers do.

It’s also important that leaders know their staff well enough to differentiate professional





learning when needed. When I was an elementary school principal, it was clear to me that different teachers and various grade-level teams had different learning needs. For example, the 5th-grade team already embodied the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard, while the 1st-grade team needed support to build its collaboration.

The same kinds of variations and stages of development hold true at many, if not most, schools, and this applies to curriculum-based professional learning as much as any other form of learning. We must meet our teachers where they are so that we can best position them to meet the needs of the children they support.

Of course, it's important to remember that all of the standards work together. Curriculum-based professional learning and the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard that can inform it are deeply connected to the Learning Designs standard because of the interactive and hands-on nature of the learning.

They also connect to Culture of Collaborative Inquiry because educators make meaning together as they work through the curriculum in a collaborative learning approach that mirrors the one their students will take. As you read this issue, I invite you to consider all the ways the standards are embedded in the excellent examples of curriculum-based professional learning and reflect on their place in your own work.

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STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Below are the standards mentioned in this column.

CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND INSTRUCTION

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators prioritize high-quality curriculum and instructional materials for students, assess student learning, and understand curriculum and implement through instruction.

LEARNING DESIGNS

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators set relevant and contextualized learning goals, ground their work in research and theories about learning, and implement evidence-based learning designs.

CULTURE OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators engage in continuous improvement, build collaboration skills and capacity, and share responsibility for improving learning for all students.

LEADERSHIP

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators establish a compelling and inclusive vision for professional learning, sustain coherent support to build educator capacity, and advocate for professional learning by sharing the importance and evidence of impact of professional learning.



We knew we needed to increase teacher buy-in and that we needed to show teachers not only *what* the curriculum is but *how* to use it.

Visit **conference.learningforward.org** for more information on this year's Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado.

CONFERENCE SPOTLIGHT

Jenny Talburt, Springfield Public Schools, Missouri

CURRICULUM DIRECTOR PUTS CONFERENCE LEARNING TO WORK IN HER DISTRICT

Jenny Talburt is director of K-5 curriculum and instruction for Springfield Public Schools in Missouri. She was inspired by her participation in the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference to focus on curriculum-based professional learning in her district. She has been applying what she learned and plans to build on it at the 2024 conference.



Her learning goal at the 2023 Learning Forward Annual Conference: I wanted to learn more about building our educators' capacity to implement curriculum well. I attended with my colleague, who is director of curriculum and instruction for grades 6-12. Together, we oversee curriculum for the district. We have developed rigorous processes to evaluate our programs, select high-quality resources, write teacher-friendly guides, train teachers, and distribute the materials to schools. However, we have been seeing less than 50% implementation at our campuses, and of that, about 45% was low-level implementation. We knew we needed to increase teacher buy-in and that we needed to show teachers not only *what* the curriculum is but *how* to use it.

What she learned: One of the most helpful sessions I went to was a (daylong) preconference session on "Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning," which was facilitated by Stephanie Hirsh and Jim Short. During this session, we began by establishing our beliefs around what we expected to see in high-quality lessons. We experienced a lesson as students and then shifted perspective to make connections to how the written curriculum supported the facilitator's instructional moves.

We then went back to our beliefs and confirmed that what we believed should be a part of a high-quality curriculum was actually present. This was an aha moment for us as we knew that our teachers may gain the buy-in we were looking for through exploring their own beliefs and making connections to the high-quality resources provided to them.

How she is putting her learning into practice: Our curriculum, instruction, and assessment team was inspired to do a book study of *Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning: The Elements*, on which the preconference session was based. From there, we decided to create model classrooms where teachers can learn how to use the district-recommended curricula. We trained 60 teacher leaders to run model classrooms across the district, following the principles of curriculum-based professional learning.

For each unit of the curriculum, the teacher leaders offer a curriculum-based professional learning session after school. All teachers are invited to participate — it's voluntary — and they get an hourly stipend. New teachers in our early career teacher program are required to participate in a session each semester. We laid out a schedule for the year so the teacher leaders and the participants can plan ahead and know they have ongoing support throughout the year.

Model classrooms have also become our new way of professional learning. We have included

it in our induction days, principal and assistant principal monthly meetings, and curriculum development council meetings. In November, we are offering a half-day of model classrooms in English language arts and math during one of our district professional learning days.

How the district is engaging leaders:

Over the summer, we invested two days in professional learning for school leaders to support their instructional leadership and help them understand what to look for in teachers’ implementation of curriculum. We also asked them to choose two model classrooms to observe. The impact of this work is evident through increased buy-in from principals.

How it’s going: Model classrooms are proving to be a great experience for our

teachers and leaders. When teachers are immersed in a lesson and experience it as a student, it doesn’t seem difficult — in fact, it seems fun! This is probably the first time I’ve experienced people excited about curriculum. A lot of teachers think the curriculum robs them of their creativity and autonomy, but that’s not true.

We want teachers to use their instructional agility to meet their students’ needs. Now our teachers are starting to understand the freedom within the framework and focus more on their instructional moves. During induction days over the summer, teachers were asking the model classroom teacher leaders, “Can I have your contact info so I can reach out to you if I get stuck?” It’s encouraging to see instructional practices grow, as well as teacher networks authentically develop.

What she hopes to learn at this year’s conference:

This year, we hope to deepen our understanding and application of curriculum-based professional learning. Our time with teachers is limited, and we want to support them to understand the standards and the structure, arc, and research behind curriculum resources and development. It’s important that teachers can trust the resource and the process so they can prioritize anticipating student misconceptions and adjusting support to meet their needs. We also hope to make connections with other districts that are applying this learning.

We are on the journey to curriculum-based professional learning and see this work making a difference for students across Springfield Public Schools for many years to come. ■



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- Support the alignment of curriculum, assessment, instructional materials, and professional learning
- Maximize resources to better support educator and student learning
- Implement shared leadership with cohesion
- Coach school, team, and individual improvement

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, senior vice president, professional services, at sharron.helmke@learningforward.org | services.learningforward.org



There's a professional development component to all instructional materials we adopt.

DISTRICT MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

David Timbs, Johnson City Schools, Tennessee

TENNESSEE DISTRICT EMBEDS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

Often ranking in the top five Tennessee school districts for achievement and growth, Johnson City Schools invests heavily in professional learning and supports this work with a Learning Forward district membership.

Now in his 10th year with the district, David Timbs is the secondary education supervisor with a focus on the high school curriculum. With a core instructional leadership team, he also helps lead K-12 professional learning and manages the school improvement planning process.

According to Timbs, the district of about 8,000 students partly owes its success to a longstanding culture that values professional learning from the superintendent and school board and throughout the organization. "We rely heavily on the Standards for Professional Learning to guide everything that we do with the design and execution of professional learning in our district," Timbs said.



What does professional learning look like in your district?

This year, we have three big bets: high-quality instructional materials supported by professional learning, job-embedded instructional coaches who help lead that professional learning, and instructional rounds.

There's a professional development component to all instructional materials we adopt. Our teachers engage in professional learning on how to use a high-quality curriculum, which was vetted through a strenuous process.

Instructional coaches are job-embedded at the high school, and others serve across the district to model in the classroom to guide the implementation of our curriculum and lead weekly professional learning for our teachers.

Instructional rounds are new to our district this year. We are training our principals and assistant principals to lead these with the district staff.

A group of seven of us cover our instructional bands. This includes our supervisors of data, special education, and special programs. We will be on-site at our 11 schools at least twice during the year where the principals will lead a focused instructional round while we visit classrooms. Then we'll talk about their professional learning strategies and look at how their checkpoint data is tracking toward year-end goals.

We highly value not interrupting class time. Professional learning is either on Saturdays or after school. Our instructional coaches meet primarily during teacher planning times. That's one thing our district believes contributes to our success, along with our commitments to high-quality materials, instructional coaches, and instructional rounds.

What is the design of your district's robust coaching program?

Over the years, instructional coaches have become so valuable in supporting classroom teachers. Having Title II funding earmarked for high-quality teacher development is a big driver for beginning this work. We have 18 instructional coaches, many of whom have attended at least one Learning Forward Annual Conference.

Because we have some new coaches, we took them through the Learning Forward Standards

for Professional Learning at our kickoff to help them learn those so they understand the intentional professional learning design in our district.

The instructional coaches help lead professional learning and instructional rounds. We have two embedded in our high school — soon to be three — with backgrounds in math, reading, and science.

We have English language arts coaches in grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8. We mirror that in math. We also employ two instructional coaches who focus on students with disabilities and work with the teachers. We have one coach who works with teachers on strategies for working with our English language learner population, who number around 400. We have two curriculum coaches embedded to direct our Response to Intervention efforts and a curriculum coach for instructional technology.

I use the phrase “lead alongside” when we support our coaches and teacher leaders to lead and support their colleagues because they are still in there doing the work. Leading alongside one another has been a very successful model.

How do curriculum learning labs work?

We are now six years into those at our high school. High schools are especially tricky when it comes to implementing professional learning because they don't have the common planning time that their elementary and middle school colleagues have.

In our model, a classroom teacher of the day would walk us through a 45-minute segment of a lesson, for example. We (educators) would actually do the student work. Then we would move to the classroom and watch that teacher implement that same lesson while we all took notes in the back of the room — not on what

the teacher was doing, but what the students were doing.

We would then debrief it, listing who was doing the lift, as far as the academics and level of rigor and thinking. We would break down the lesson and discuss how to improve the delivery for different learners. This is how we started getting our teachers to think about what was going on in other classrooms.

The learning labs are steeped in the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning, especially around equity and building capacity. We now have 10 groups of teachers we pull three times per year, so 30 curriculum labs are led by me, our curriculum assistant principal, and our coaches.

How do instructional rounds connect to the learning labs?

We offered teachers professional learning on instructional rounds, where they visit one another's classrooms, watch a 15- to 20-minute lesson segment, and then debrief. If we have learning labs in August, November, and February, for example, then between those dates the teachers go see what's going on in the other classrooms during their planning periods. This creates discussions about curriculum and the standards. We do that with 10 complete subject areas at our high school annually.

We presented this model at the Learning Forward Annual Conference in Nashville in 2022 — how to use high-quality professional learning. It's not just a one-time sit-and-get but something deeply embedded that we consistently follow up on throughout the year.

In what other ways does your district invest in teacher leaders and leadership?

We are nine years into a project

that was really born from Paul Fleming, Learning Forward's chief learning officer, who started a movement here (in Tennessee). This grew out of some work with Learning Forward to create teacher leaders for those not ready to leave the classroom to become administrators.

Our teacher leaders meet five Saturdays per year, for which they are paid a stipend. They learn about the Standards for Professional Learning, and we lean heavily into the equity pieces. Because we are a district with high-poverty and affluent schools, we leverage what we do with professional learning to continue to provide equity.

We now have cohorts of around 110 embedded instructional technology coaches who, over nine years, gain expertise in our instructional platforms. Every year, we send the new cohorts to national conferences, including Learning Forward's. Once that group comes back, they share some of their greatest takeaways. Their role is to be job-embedded coaches from the classroom level at their buildings.

We've also got a steering committee of former teacher leaders who are paid an additional stipend for designing the learning of the returning teacher leaders. We work with our 11 principals on designing professional learning, steeped in the Standards for Professional Learning at the school level.

Every summer, we design a technology academy conference, where we host around 350 to 400 teachers and offer upwards of 64 different professional learning sessions before school starts for about 75% of our teachers. This past summer was one of our biggest ones on the topic of artificial intelligence. I'm looking forward to some sessions on that (at the upcoming Learning Forward Annual Conference) in Denver. ■



Principal supervisors can play an important role in enhancing principals' capacity as instructional leaders while supporting curriculum implementation.

Ayesha Farag (faraga@newton.k12.ma.us) is assistant superintendent for elementary education in Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts, Learning Forward Foundation board ambassador, 2021 graduate of the Learning Forward Academy, and coach of the Academy Class of 2026.

FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

Ayesha Farag

LEADERS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING NEW CURRICULUM

In the August 2024 issue of *The Learning Professional*, Learning Forward's Shannon Bogle emphasized the critical role of high-quality curriculum and materials, coupled with professional learning, to support student reading development and achievement. One point that resonated for me is the importance of equipping district and school leaders to support teachers with curriculum implementation through effective feedback, coaching, and ongoing data analysis (Bogle, 2024).

Like many districts around the country, my district — Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts — recently adopted a new high-quality, evidence-based reading curriculum for grades K-5. Last

year, I took part in a powerful professional learning experience for leaders that emphasized the value of instructionally focused learning to support its implementation.

In my 14 years as a principal and three years as a principal supervisor, I had never experienced this type of professional learning structure. The power of this approach lies in its job-embedded nature, grounded in our specific curriculum and school contexts. It offers meaningful collaboration between district leaders, principals, and literacy specialists while engaging us in gathering, analyzing, and using data that principals and literacy specialists then apply toward developing specific action plans.

The insights I gained from this curriculum-based professional learning experience have prompted reflection and conversation with colleagues and are helping us to think further about how to best support teachers and other staff in their curriculum implementation.



WHAT CURRICULUM-BASED LEARNING FOR LEADERS LOOKS LIKE

As our district began implementation of the new curriculum — for all schools in grades K-2 and some schools through 5th grade — school principals, literacy specialists, and district leaders from multiple departments engaged in ongoing, facilitated learning to build curriculum understanding, analyze instruction, and monitor progress. This is consistent with the recommendation of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, which emphasizes the importance of investing in building leaders' knowledge and understanding of new curriculum so they can support teachers (NIET, 2020).

Guided by a common vision for effective implementation of high-quality instructional materials, as recommended by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2023), our team set out to address key questions about ideal classroom implementation, student experiences, and teacher actions to achieve equitable outcomes. This vision emphasized student engagement with complex tasks, deep discourse, and culturally responsive practices.

Learning sessions oriented our group of leaders to the fundamental structures and design components of the curriculum. We also learned how to support teachers through observations, learning walks, collecting implementation data, and providing feedback. With guidance and support from a coach, we developed tailored, data-driven action plans.

HOW IT'S MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Throughout last year, we collected data at each school and saw positive changes in how leaders are supporting teachers.

Principals reported a deeper understanding of curriculum implementation and an enhanced ability to support teachers effectively, including improved classroom observation practices, improved ability to provide targeted feedback for teachers, and stronger partnerships with literacy specialists.

They noted how they and their teachers benefited from coaching around the observation and data collection processes. “I had never experienced professional development that was so clear about implementation criteria,” said Principal Tony Byers of Williams Elementary School, noting that he learned to define implementation with integrity and then check that implementation during learning walks.

Becca Brogadir, principal of Ward Elementary School, said, “The coaching required us to use the observational data we collected to identify areas for growth. As a team, we (then) hypothesized what actions could positively impact instructional practices and put them into action.”

The principals also noted the ways this process sparked teachers’ interest in expanding their own professional learning. At Mason-Rice Elementary School, teachers asked to join the literacy specialist and Principal Jake Bultema in visiting classrooms to observe their colleagues teaching the new curriculum. They were especially interested in “seeing what student engagement looks and sounds like,” Bultema said. Together, he and his school’s literacy specialist developed plans to support teachers in unpacking curriculum indicators, co-planning lessons, and engaging in joint classroom walk-throughs in the year ahead.

“I had never experienced professional development that was so clear about implementation criteria,” said Principal Tony Byers of Williams Elementary School.

Through their involvement in curriculum-based professional learning, principals developed valuable insights about effective professional learning that they and district leaders will now carefully consider and incorporate while planning support for the entire principal team and broader curriculum implementation efforts.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

As we expand implementation to grades 3-5 in all schools, I will draw from this valuable professional learning opportunity to further develop structures and opportunities to effectively support principals across the district.

Principal supervisors like me can play an important role in enhancing principals’ capacity as instructional leaders while supporting curriculum implementation. Yet for many central office leaders, a myriad of issues often fragment their attention, diluting focus on instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

I experienced this myself during our professional learning experience last year, when meeting conflicts, school visits, unexpected events, and other competing demands limited my ability to consistently participate in scheduled learning sessions. While I learned a great deal from the sessions I attended, missing sessions limited my opportunities to fully engage in the work, more fully understand the curriculum, and critically reflect on the implications for principal and teacher support.

As I continue to grow in my practice as a district leader, I am committed to examining ways to center instructional leadership support in my work through deliberate focus and collaboration with colleagues. Aligning our work and focusing on our most important priority — supporting teaching and learning — is important for all principal supervisors because engaging in deliberate, focused, continuous practices to center instructional leadership and help principals grow improves principal leadership and outcomes for students. (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

When implementing a new curriculum, it is natural to think first about the needs of teachers on the front line of instruction. However, to effectively support them, we must focus on leaders as well. With deep curriculum understanding, leaders can better anticipate needs, establish support structures, and provide focused feedback to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. By empowering principals and district leaders, we support instructional leadership that maximizes the benefit of high-quality curricula through improved teacher support.

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While some leadership teams start with all of the skills and competencies needed to achieve goals, many do not.

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LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Jody Spiro and Paul Fleming

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING BOOSTS TEAMS' SKILLS AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

Collective efficacy — the belief that a group has the power to achieve its goals — is important for leadership teams' success. As described in a previous column in this series, one of the key ways to develop collective efficacy is to build on team members' strengths (Spiro & Fisher, 2024). Existing strengths provide a solid foundation — and foundations are meant to be built on. In this article, we focus on how teams can leverage professional learning to build up from their foundations and boost collective efficacy.

Identify skills needed to achieve the team's goal.

While some leadership teams start with all of the skills and competencies needed to achieve goals, many do not. Members can fill the gaps with professional learning. That process starts with identifying what individuals and the team as a whole need to know and be able to do.

After a leadership team has developed its vision and problem of practice and identified an early win (Spiro & Reyes-Guerra, 2024), members should discuss and agree on the skills needed to carry out the immediate plan and determine next steps for longer-term strategies.

Such skills are likely to include project management, expertise in specific curriculum disciplines, resource gathering and allocation, communication with other colleagues and teams, and use of data to monitor progress, measure impact, and inform future plans.

Once the needs are determined, each person can take the lead in learning and developing skills, then engage others in that learning process. Team members can then weave together all the skills across the team. With this approach to simultaneously developing individual and collective knowledge and committing to collective responsibility, teams can better meet student needs.

Ground skills development in Standards for Professional Learning.

Professional learning to build teams' skills and, ultimately, collective efficacy should be high-quality and aligned to standards and best practices. The Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) provide an evidence-based framework for ensuring that educators' learning leads to improved outcomes.

It is worth noting that one of the 11 standards — Culture of Collaborative Inquiry — articulates how high-quality professional learning is team-based and grounded in collective knowledge building: "Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators engage in continuous improvement, build collaboration skills and capacity, and share responsibility for improving learning for all students" (Learning Forward, 2022).

What does that standard look like in practice for leadership teams? Superintendents, principals, and leaders of professional learning establish expectations for collective improvement and protect time and resources that support ongoing team learning. Building-level leaders of professional learning become experts in collaborative inquiry and support their colleagues



LEADERSHIP TEAM INSTITUTE

Powerful examples of learning teams developing and deploying collective efficacy can be seen in Learning Forward's new Leadership Team Institute. The institute provides an innovative opportunity for teams consisting of a principal, assistant principal, teacher leaders, and principal supervisor to engage in a yearlong program focused on implementing evidence-based practices that address a problem of practice, improve educator and team practices, and increase student success.

Learn more about the institute and how your team can join at learningforward.org/leadership-team-institute/

in using continuous improvement approaches and understanding their value. Educators in all roles commit to building their knowledge and skills to learn in concert, remaining open and curious about their students and colleagues, and supporting one another to achieve the goal of improved learning for all students.

It's important to remember that all of the standards work together. The other aspects of high-quality professional learning need to be present along with the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry for team members' learning to lead to change.

Use professional learning as part of the team's continuous improvement.

One way to ensure team members are building the skills needed for collective efficacy is to develop a personalized professional learning plan for each person. The plans may include various methods, depending on each team member's needs and preferred learning style. These might include any or all of the following:

- Book studies with team discussion
- Collaborative study of curriculum and standards at multiple grade levels
- Attending a conference with the intent to change or improve a

specific instructional practice over time and planning for applying the learning over the next six months

- Leading professional learning for educators in your school or district
- Participating in or leading professional learning communities using evidence-based practices
- Taking a virtual or in-person course that provides opportunities to practice and reflect on new skills
- Nonevaluative peer observation and feedback on teaching techniques, skills, and strategies
- Structured reflection with tested protocols and clear norms

As team members implement their learning plans, they should regularly debrief what they are learning with the entire team to enrich the team as a whole and enhance team cohesiveness and collective efficacy.

Through this process, the team can reflect on progress toward its goal and make midcourse corrections to increase the likelihood of success. This whole process simultaneously builds collective efficacy and concrete skills.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions can help

you and your team shape professional learning to be most valuable for individuals and the team as a whole.

1. What are your team's vision, goals, and early win?
2. What team strengths can you build on to achieve these?
3. What skills do you need to build?
4. Which team members might learn and lead work in the highest-priority learning areas?
5. How do those team members learn best?
6. How will you ensure that the professional learning for team members aligns with the Standards for Professional Learning?
7. How will team members share their learning with one another to enhance collective efficacy and achieve goals?

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One of the main goals is to support people who find themselves in a leadership position where they are responsible for coordinating or directing professional learning in a district or system.

To learn more about Professional Learning Essentials and our other courses, visit learningforward.org/online-courses-for-educators/

ONLINE COURSE SPOTLIGHT

Chad Schmidt, instructor, Professional Learning Essentials

LEARN THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

Whether you're new to your role or want to improve your professional learning skills, Learning Forward's four-hour self-paced course, Professional Learning Essentials, can boost your knowledge of the fundamentals of leading high-quality professional learning. It delves into the key attributes of a comprehensive professional learning system and the roles within it.

Through videos, vignettes, readings, and reflection activities, participants learn how to help move their system from a "PD mindset" to one of embedded professional learning. The course explores how to plan, implement, and evaluate professional learning that results in better teaching and improved student outcomes.

Instructor Chad Schmidt provided insight into what participants can glean from this asynchronous learning opportunity.



WHO SHOULD TAKE THIS COURSE?

The course helps participants establish and maintain a vision for professional learning. One of the main goals is to support people who find themselves in a leadership position where they are responsible for coordinating or directing professional learning in a district or system. Often, they're coming from a variety of experiences without a lot of formal knowledge or preparation for high-quality, standards-based professional learning.

Participants might be in district or school leadership positions, like a director, principal, or coordinator, or they might be a teacher leader, such as an instructional coach who designs and facilitates professional learning in their school. Sometimes new leaders are only partially focused on professional learning coordination along with other responsibilities and duties such as coordinating their Multi-Tiered System of Supports or the English learner program.

One of our motivations for creating the course was to help ground people in what has changed in our field in the last 20 years. It used to be called staff development, and then it became commonly known as professional development.

We help them understand that professional learning is different than professional development and that professional learning requires a systemic approach. We push them to reflect on and evaluate their current system and how that's similar to or different from the components and practices of a more comprehensive professional learning system.

HOW IS THE COURSE STRUCTURED?

It's eight modules in length, estimated to be slightly less than four hours. It's built in a way that it's asynchronous so that an individual can go through it independently. But going through it with a partner or collaborative team would be valuable so they can check in with each other.

In laying out the foundations of what a comprehensive professional learning system entails, we guide participants through a deep dive into the roles and responsibilities of district and school leaders. We discuss who holds responsibility for the different parts of the system, including guiding and leading professional learning.

The course includes a module focusing on the team cycles of learning. When we built that module in particular, we wanted it to be a practical tool for people in a variety of different positions that they can use and apply in their system fairly quickly.

Reflective practices are built in throughout the course. There are opportunities to assess and reflect on current structures, policies, and practices and reflect on the essential elements of a comprehensive professional learning system.

We prompt learners to think about

different aspects of their systems. For example, how does a specific element look in your system? Where does it already exist? What might be your next move? Reflection is embedded into all modules.

A highlight of the reading is the three core texts we rely on, all published by Learning Forward. Most modules have some introduction of content through a video or reading, then we ask how that looks in their systems. We want participants to think about where the concepts from those resources exist in their system and

identify potential gaps.

ARE THERE ANY PREREQUISITES?

There is no prerequisite. You could start with this course or a different Learning Forward course — other courses will be supplementary and helpful, but not required. The essentials course doesn't rely on knowledge of the Standards for Professional Learning, but it does refer to them multiple times. Whether someone begins with the course on the standards or this one, it really is a choose-your-own-adventure, a challenge by choice. ■

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Professional Learning Essentials
.....

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.....

Introduction to Standards for Professional Learning
.....



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CHANGEMAKERS: JENNIFER AHN

NOMINATED BY NINA PORTUGAL

Jennifer Ahn, executive director of Lead by Learning, “is a California-based education leader and a voice in supporting school and district change through adult learning,” writes Nina Portugal, Lead by Learning’s director of visibility and community engagement. Ahn has written for *The Learning Professional* and presented her work at Learning Forward’s Annual Conference.

“With over 20 years in education as a teacher, school counselor, and learning leader, Jennifer is dedicated to supporting all young people to thrive in schools and lead choice-filled lives,” Portugal’s nomination states. “Her cutting-edge professional learning disrupts school inequities by creating adult learning environments that center Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) educators and students’ experiences while fostering belonging and trust for all learners.”

SHIFTING MINDSETS FOR AUTHENTIC COLLABORATION

“I met Jennifer while working as a high school teacher in Oakland, California, when she supported my school’s professional learning. Our school, while full of incredible educators, was not yet realizing our potential because we struggled with collaboration, often focusing more on operations. We were stymied by perfectionism and a fear of vulnerability that hindered our ability to interrogate our practices and learn from student data.

“As a skilled professional learning expert, Jennifer listened deeply to our system to re-establish practices for deep learning grounded in adult social and emotional learning. She supported us to first shift our mindsets before shifting practices. This transformed our school, and my own teaching practices, all leading to improved student outcomes.

“With stronger professional learning and collaboration, there were increases in teacher retention and our students excelled. With Jennifer’s support, our site set an equity-centered goal to improve outcomes for our English language learners who previously had not made academic progress at the same rates as their peers.

“Each month, she guided us to return to our data, goals, and questions to share what was working and interrogate

what was not effective. Students previously on the margins moved to the center, showing significant progress in English proficiency, reading fluency, and overall academic performance. Not only did we feel efficacious as teachers, we had the data to prove it. This fed our drive to continue collaborating and improving.”

WORK GROUNDED IN COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY GARNERS RESULTS

“Since then, I joined Jennifer at Lead by Learning, where I now facilitate professional learning grounded in collaborative inquiry. I’ve observed the impactful way Jennifer’s professional learning addresses inequities across all levels of the education system. She uses professional learning and collaboration to address inequities with after-school staff, classroom educators, school administrators, and district leaders.

“Since 2020, Jennifer has centered equity within our organization by developing the BIPOC Leaders network, inviting leaders from various education systems into a space where they can share their lived experiences without having to defend or excuse the actions of others, heal from racial harm, and center BIPOC thriving. Under her leadership, the group has developed an anti-racist framework to support BIPOC educators and students in their home schools and districts.

“Jennifer’s commitment to inquiry and learning permeates our organization. The way in which she lives and breathes inquiry and learning fosters a culture of collective efficacy for our internal team so that we can then do so for our external partners. Her approach ensures we continue to address historical inequities and adapt to meet the needs of our education ecosystem.” ■

EXAMINE. STUDY. UNDERSTAND.

RESEARCH



FOLLOW THE RESEARCH ON CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Research is a key element of building a field, including the field of curriculum-based professional learning, writes Elizabeth Foster (p. 22). Foster reviews recent and foundational studies about the benefits of and strategies for curriculum-focused educator learning and shares implications for learning leaders.



It is important to look to existing research for guidance about how to adopt or adapt curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and aligned professional learning.

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RESEARCH & EVALUATION

Elizabeth Foster

RESEARCH STRENGTHENS CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Researchers and education leaders have long argued that professional learning is most effective when grounded in day-to-day instructional practices — that is, in what educators teach and how. Curriculum is a fundamental part of that equation.

Studies have found that increasing the quality and rigor of curriculum and instructional materials can lead to improved student outcomes, including achievement (Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012; Kane et al., 2016). But research also suggests that curriculum alone is not enough. It is the combination of high-quality instructional materials and high-quality professional learning that leads to improved outcomes (Blazar et al., 2019). Professional learning focused on these materials can amplify their impact if it is comprehensive, sustained, and well-designed, as described in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

Learning Forward has been committed to curriculum-based professional learning for years, as described in the white paper *High-Quality Curricula and Team-Based Professional Learning: A Perfect Partnership for Equity* (Learning Forward, 2018). That commitment is reflected in many aspects of our work, including the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard, which was added to the latest iteration of the Standards for Professional Learning, based on both individual research studies and meta-analyses of content-specific professional learning.

We are far from the only organization to recognize the importance of curriculum, but a recent review of the state of the field found that educators' knowledge about and implementation of curriculum-based professional learning is still emerging (Chu et al., 2022). "Emerging" is the first stage of a continuum developed by the consulting firm Bridgespan group that also includes "forming" and "evolving and sustaining."

Research is a key element of building any field, including this one. Rigorous studies comparing interventions take years to conduct and analyze. Even as this work continues, it is important to look to existing research for guidance about how to adopt or adapt curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and aligned professional learning. Of equal importance are practitioners' experiences with and insights about curriculum-based professional learning that can drive and inform future studies.

HOW THE CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND INSTRUCTION STANDARD EVOLVED

During the development of the current version of the Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Forward looked to research to craft the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard, including studies focused on professional learning, improving teachers' content knowledge and instructional strategies, changing educators' beliefs, and better understanding and implementing curriculum. Here are studies that informed the standard and that practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers can look to for further developing their knowledge base, curriculum implementation, and future research.

RESEARCH ON THE VALUE OF CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Novicoff & Dee, 2023: Professional learning to support the implementation of a literacy curriculum in California resulted in gains for teachers and students, including "significant (and cost-effective) improvements in ELA achievement in its first two years of implementation."

Lynch et al., 2019: A meta-analysis of 95 rigorous studies of STEM curriculum programs found that programs had stronger outcomes when they included help for teachers to learn to use curriculum materials, improve teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, and understand how students learn. In addition, summer workshops and teacher meetings focused on classroom implementation were correlated with stronger outcomes.

Taylor et al., 2015: A high-quality, inquiry-based high school science curriculum and aligned professional learning were designed with educative components — content built into the curriculum that is explicitly designed to support teachers’ learning and development. The study found moderate positive effects on teacher practice and student achievement.

Weiner & Pimentel, 2017: The Aspen Institute offers a review of research that links curriculum implementation and professional learning, describes examples, and offers recommendations for strengthening professional learning structures by focusing on implementing the curriculum.

INSIGHTS ABOUT IMPLEMENTING CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Short & Hirsh, 2022: *Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning: The Elements* describes professional learning designs and enabling conditions that support educators in understanding the intent and components of a curriculum to focus on using the curriculum to provide effective instruction for all students. It also includes a review of foundational research underlying the authors’ framework of curriculum-based professional learning.

NIET, 2020: *High-Quality Curriculum Implementation: Connecting What to Teach With How to Teach It* offers six lessons from experience with district and school leaders, including:

- Ensure a focus on leaders.
- Create time, structures, and formal roles for ongoing, school-based collaborative professional learning.
- Use a rubric to guide conversations about teaching and learning with the curriculum.
- Anchor coaching and feedback in the curriculum.

- Recognize the stages of curriculum implementation and what teachers need to progress to higher stages.
- Ensure that districts work closely with schools to plan, communicate, and implement school-based professional learning that blends support for curriculum and instructional practice.

NEXT STEPS

Learning Forward continues to review the research on curriculum-based professional learning and apply it through our Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network (see the article on p. 26). We also support districts’ curriculum-based professional learning in multiple content areas through professional services contracts.

This work is showing benefits for students and illuminating avenues for further research. The network is yielding improved math instruction and student math performance and providing opportunities to dig deep on specific structures and strategies that make the most difference. For example: What is the optimal balance of coaching teams and coaching individual teachers? What is the ideal balance of a coach’s expertise in the curriculum and coaching techniques?

As answers to these questions emerge and research on curriculum-based professional learning continues to grow, we will share key findings and insights to help you continue to improve your work and your students’ learning.

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DATA POINTS



67% OF EDUCATORS SAY JOB-EMBEDDED, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING MATTERS MOST

Rivet Education's research brief, *The Supply and Demand of Curriculum-Based Professional Learning*, revealed the latest insights on the use of high-quality instructional materials and the curriculum-based professional learning to support their implementation. According to professional learning providers, collaborative professional learning is the leading format, indicated by 67% of responding educators, who said that this improved teaching or student learning to a moderate or large extent. The other formats said to make an impact are coaching (47%) and workshops (45%).

bit.ly/4cZ8D6E

84% OF PARENTS SAY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SHOULD BE INFORMED BY STUDENT TESTING DATA

The National Parents Union recently released survey results of 1,518 parents with students in pre-K to 12th grade public schools. 84% of these parents agreed it was valuable to use student testing data to make decisions about curriculum, such as providing high-quality instructional materials and evidence-based reading instruction — for example, the science of reading. Regarding school and district resource allocations, 89% said academic test data should be used to determine

the implementation of professional learning or instructional coaching to support high-quality curriculum.

bit.ly/3TglusN

6TH LOWEST UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York produced a tool to look at labor market outcomes of new college grads according to their major. Of the 74 majors on the list, those with degrees in education fared better in terms of employment than those in many other areas of study. The unemployment rate for those who majored in elementary or general education was 1.5%, the sixth and seventh lowest on the list. For those who studied secondary education, the unemployment rate was 1.6%, and 1.9% for those majoring in early childhood education. For comparison, industrial engineering came in first, at 0.2%, and art history was last at 8%. These findings may provide a helpful selling point for recruiting new teacher candidates.

bit.ly/3XcOK5T

81% OF AMERICANS PUT A HIGH PRIORITY ON TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The 56th annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools shows that Americans' top educational priorities are preparing students to enter the workforce and attracting and retaining good teachers. Members of all political

parties, 81% of respondents, said they want the next federal U.S. administration to focus on attracting and retaining good teachers. That is second among seven priorities, just behind preparing students to enter the workforce, at 84%. 61% of Americans prefer a candidate who favors increased funding for public schools. Other areas of priority for the next administration are student mental health (73%), helping students who've fallen behind, (72%), and college affordability, (70%).

bit.ly/479DwE3

64 HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS MAKE ABOVE-AVERAGE GAINS

Two reports from Education Reform Now highlight high-performing, high-poverty schools in Massachusetts and Colorado that demonstrated high academic proficiency or significant academic growth on state assessments. Collectively, 64 schools achieved above-average proficiency rates in math or English language arts or demonstrated significant growth in those subject areas since 2019. In Massachusetts, school leaders cited ongoing professional learning and coaching among the top five contributors to success. In Colorado, a key strategy was aligning data-driven decision-making and high-quality instructional materials, supported by professional learning on content and instructional strategies.

bit.ly/4dLiRIY

INFORM. ENGAGE. IMMERSE.

FOCUS

CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



THE IMPACT OF CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Curriculum-based professional learning is leading to improvements in teaching and learning in schools across diverse communities. In schools that are participating in Learning Forward's Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network, teachers are implementing math curriculum with more integrity and students are outperforming their peers (p. 26). In other initiatives, science teachers are developing agency as instructional experts (p. 32) and educators are bringing more rigor to their work with multilingual students (p. 38).



Curriculum-based professional learning benefits students and teachers

BY ELIZABETH FOSTER

Corinne Zaccaria, a 6th-grade math teacher in the School District of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, knew that using a high-quality curriculum in her classroom was important. But when her school began using Illustrative Mathematics, a curriculum that is

highly rated by independent reviewers, she found it daunting.

“At the beginning of the year, implementation was scary. I didn’t feel fully prepared to implement it,” she said. The curriculum requires students to build their understanding of math concepts over several lessons, and Zaccaria found that “it was hard at the

beginning of the year trying to let (my students) work through the productive struggle.”

But things began to change for Zaccaria — and more importantly, for her students — after she began participating in the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network facilitated by Learning Forward.

Through the network, teachers, instructional coaches, and leaders dove into Illustrative Mathematics, engaging in it the same way their students would, practicing instructional strategies, and identifying challenges and finding solutions to them.

After participating in the network for one school year, Zaccaria said that being part of the network has helped her grow as a teacher and improve her instruction, citing the value of “getting to hear strategies from teachers from other schools, other grade levels, as well as from coaches and the administration.”

Working through the curriculum together with colleagues to learn about various instructional strategies and resources in the curriculum “has made students have a deeper understanding of the content,” she said. “I am seeing the growth that my students are having because of the curriculum.”

Zaccaria’s students are not alone. In just one year, schools that participated in the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network saw strong growth in teacher practice and student outcomes. There was an increase in the integrity of curriculum implementation, which led to increased student engagement and improved student achievement. Ninety-six percent of network participants reported that their understanding of curriculum-based professional learning had increased, and 93% reported that they now understand what data is needed to determine improvements in curriculum implementation.

That learning from participating in the network means that more teachers are understanding the value of and

strategies for high-quality curriculum so that students can access content that makes a difference for them. Alexander Riccardo, a 7th-grade math teacher in Philadelphia who also participates in the network, said, “I have found that the more I use (the curriculum) with integrity, the more the students had a better use of mathematical language ... (and) the better the results in their formative assessments afterward.”

WHY EDUCATORS NEED CURRICULUM-BASED LEARNING

One reason states and districts adopt high-quality, standards-aligned curricula is so teachers don’t spend time creating or finding their own materials, allowing them to focus instead on their classroom teaching, analyzing student data, and planning how to tailor content and instruction to meet individual student needs (Instruction Partners, 2017). Using a high-quality curriculum also provides greater coherence and alignment across individual classrooms and grade levels, making it an important factor in achieving equity (Learning Forward, 2018).

But high-quality curricula, on their own, are not enough. Even when a school adopts a high-quality curriculum, many teachers don’t use it or implement it incompletely or without a deep understanding of the concepts and structures. Even teachers like Zaccaria, who understand the value of the curriculum, can find it challenging to implement.

Today’s high-quality curricula are focused on inquiry and making meaning from real-world phenomena

and experiences. Many teachers didn’t learn in this way when they were students or when they were teachers in training, so they need and deserve opportunities to dive into the curriculum and become experts at applying it.

The implementation of this kind of professional learning is a complex and challenging undertaking (Chu et al., 2022). It requires putting into practice all the components we know make professional learning high quality, which are outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). Curriculum-based professional learning should be job-embedded, relevant and responsive to classrooms and instructional practices, and sustained, with multifaceted and appropriate learning designs.

LEARNING FORWARD’S CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

Learning Forward, with grant funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, developed the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network to help educators engage in this kind of high-quality curriculum-focused learning and implement curricula with integrity so that student learning improves.

We launched the network in fall 2023 with three large districts that were in the early stages of implementing Illustrative Mathematics: the School District of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, and Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland.

District teams are composed of math teachers, coaches, and school and district leaders. Learning Forward leads regular, goal-focused professional learning with each team, drawing on research about best practices and on the curriculum and the instructional materials themselves.

For instance, experiencing the curriculum the way students will experience it has been shown to be an effective professional learning strategy (Short & Hirsh, 2022). Therefore, every in-person professional learning session includes an extended active learning session in which the educators “put on their student hats” (Klein & Riordan, 2011) to do the math lessons using the guiding principles of problem-based teaching and learning articulated in the curricular materials.

We work with team members to engage with and understand the materials while also being responsive to the needs of each educator and their school and district contexts.

All of this is built on a strong research base about professional learning and a decade of experience about how to ensure participants are supported to learn and achieve their goals, individually and collectively. The cadence and progression of learning are grounded in well-established theories of change management and adult learning, and each learning session is carefully designed to build on the previous one, taking into account the data and feedback from participants, information from coaching sessions, and progress toward the district and network goals.

To accomplish this, we look to the Standards for Professional Learning, which emphasize how professional learning is a recursive process that builds over time and is responsive and adaptive to what came before.

TEACHERS AT THE CENTER

Teacher voice and perspectives are central to the network. Teachers are the most direct change agents because they are the ones who implement the

curriculum with students. They are also the people who most commonly test the change ideas identified by the teams, collect data, and report back to the school teams about their findings to determine next steps.

To implement the curriculum successfully, teachers need to be at the center of developing the teams’ understanding of classroom-level challenges, collaboratively determining potential strategies for improvement, planning how to implement a specific change idea, and collecting data to assess whether their new strategy results in improved outcomes.

For example, many teachers find it difficult to get to all of the components of the curriculum because of time constraints, scheduling conflicts, and competing priorities. Illustrative Mathematics assumes that class periods are 60 minutes long, but in many schools, classes are only 45 minutes. In addition, class periods are sometimes interrupted by fire drills, assemblies, and test preparation and administration, which can set teachers and students back in the intended pacing.

Teachers are best positioned to identify these challenges and ways to address them. This is an important shift from more traditional top-down approaches. As Patti Swift, a secondary math coach for Montgomery County Public Schools, said, “One of the biggest shifts is that we are having the teachers set goals for how they want to change things in their classrooms.” This approach builds teachers’ agency, buy-in, and ultimately their capacity and willingness to implement the curriculum.

FOCUSING ON CHANGE IDEAS

Rather than take on the entire curriculum and all the challenges at once, we supported teams to choose a particular aspect of the curriculum they wanted to improve. Schools continued to implement the whole curriculum, but they focused their improvement work on a specific strategy or

curriculum component. The change ideas varied by team because each team faced different pressing challenges.

Change ideas included the following:

- A team that found it frequently ran out of time for the lesson synthesis focused on using collaborative planning time to adjust its use and pacing of instructional time.
- A team with the long-term goal of increasing students’ understanding of and facility with math concepts focused on improving the use of math language routines, a way the curriculum structures student dialogue to promote student engagement and productive struggle.
- A team that found the amount of narrative language in the curriculum challenging for its English learner students tested a strategy of having students annotate the lessons.

After identifying their goals and change ideas, teams conducted the first in a series of plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles, a structure for studying discrete changes and modifying them based on lessons learned. These cycles, which are grounded in improvement science (Bryk et al., 2015), foster ongoing inquiry and reflection.

Learning Forward then facilitated monthly virtual coaching sessions to help teams discuss their change ideas for improving curriculum implementation, reflect on real-time process data about changes in instruction and student learning, and determine whether to adopt the change idea strategy, adapt it, or abandon it in favor of a different strategy tied to curriculum implementation.

We also hosted monthly virtual professional learning sessions where all teams could learn together, problem-solve, and share tools and strategies as well as two in-person cross-network meetings. Teams shared data, findings, and reflections through the network for the benefit of all.



CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND QUALITY

Professional learning should not automatically be assumed to be high quality solely because of a focus on curriculum and instructional materials. For instance, professional learning that occurs in a single session and is not part of a purposeful learning arc, or professional learning that does not respond to the needs of the adult learner or where learners are in the change process or curriculum implementation stages, will not lead to higher achievement for students.

This is why all professional learning, including curriculum-based professional learning, needs to be anchored in the Standards for Professional Learning, which describe the content, processes, and conditions necessary for professional learning that leads to improved student and educator outcomes (Learning Forward, 2022).

Conversely, high-quality professional learning is not always about curriculum. Some content requires additional attention and may cut across curricula and disciplines, such as social and emotional learning strategies, trauma-informed instructional practices, and leadership development that focuses on interpersonal and team relationships.

IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENT LEARNING

To determine whether the implementation of curriculum was improving and whether student achievement was rising, we tracked progress on several levels. The districts were at different stages in their implementation of the Illustrative Mathematics curriculum, so progress and growth looked different across the three school systems. But each made strides in their own way in year one, and we anticipate further improvements in year two, which is underway now.

Montgomery County: Students in network schools improved their scores on district and school math assessments and are outperforming others in the district on common formative assessments. For example, at Neelsville Middle School, about 75% of students showed growth from fall to winter on the district math performance assessment.

Sixth graders whose teachers participated in the network outperformed the county average on the Illustrative Math cool-down by almost 17% in December, only a few months after the network began.

Changes in teachers' instructional practices over the same time period suggest that the work being done in the network is leading to these improvements. For example:

- At Neelsville Middle School, teachers reported completing the lesson synthesis — a core component of the curriculum, but one that many teachers find challenging to get to — in over 60% of their classes after starting at close to zero at the beginning of the year.
- At Gaithersburg Middle School, teachers increased their use of math language routines as part of their lesson instruction after they spent planning and professional learning time on better understanding how to use these routines in each unit and lesson. Students in the classrooms where teachers are increasingly using math language routines are talking more about math concepts, as shown in the teacher tallies about whether students are talking and what they are talking about.
- At Shady Grove Middle School, teachers are planning and implementing the math language routines 70% of the time. As teachers changed their instructional routines, student-to-student discourse increased.

Metro Nashville: English learner students are showing progress after 6th- and 8th-grade teachers implemented a strategy focusing on teaching

students to annotate their work and thereby increase their math vocabulary and understanding. For example, at Goodlettsville Middle School, students of participating teachers scored above district averages on the WIDA Access assessment, an assessment used for English learner students.

The number of English learner students meeting their growth standard was 5.6% higher than the district rate for 6th graders and 2.4% higher than the district rate for 8th graders. In contrast, among 7th graders, whose teachers did not implement the annotation strategy, the percentage of English learner students meeting their growth goal was 9.4% *lower* than the district rate.

Samantha Spencer, a 6th-grade teacher, explained, “We have a very high English language learner and special education population. And the students just literally could not understand the text ... so we broke down the language and made it so that our students could work.”

She believes there was a direct connection between the implementation strategy and student results. “Because of the annotation and the focus on making sure they understood the language in the book itself, they were able to make growth,” she said.

Philadelphia: Harding Middle School teachers focused on improving student engagement in the warm-up,

the component of the Illustrative Math curriculum that activates prior knowledge and foreshadows the day’s activities. According to tally sheets that teachers use to track students’ completion and quality of lesson warm-ups, students are engaging more with the curriculum.

Teacher Alexander Riccardo reported that not only did students “get to the tools and materials right away, but also were getting more efficient with content-related responses, reflecting an increased engagement and understanding.” He also observed a higher percentage of students mastering the cool-downs, meaning that they were grasping and able to articulate the point of the lesson.

IMPROVEMENTS IN TEACHER PRACTICE

Looking across the network, data suggest that participating educators are improving their knowledge, skills, and practices, which are likely leading to the improvements they see with their students. For example:

- Participating educators consistently report on surveys that their participation is relevant to their daily work, the network learning is providing them with strategies to support traditionally underserved students, and they appreciate learning from and collaborating with colleagues from their own and other schools and districts.
- Learning Forward’s monthly coaching calls with the teams reveal that both collaborative planning time and coaching provided by the instructional coaches are increasingly focused on improving curriculum implementation.
- Nearly all participants said that over the year of engaging with the network, their understanding of curriculum-based professional learning improved. (One teacher responded “not sure” while the other 27 responded yes.)

In addition, participants are showing more understanding that professional learning and continuous improvement go hand in hand. Tyrunya Goodwin, a district lead coach for Metro Nashville Public Schools, said that the network has helped shift her team’s mindset to: What do we need to adopt or what do we need to adapt? What do we need to abandon? That kind of mindset is important for building teachers’ buy-in, self-efficacy, and accurate execution of the curriculum elements.

We believe part of the reason educators are making this shift is that they are engaging with high-quality resources themselves — not just the Illustrative Mathematics curriculum, but also the Standards for Professional Learning and related resources, through which they develop a deeper understanding of what high-quality professional learning is, and the book *Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning: The Elements* (Short & Hirsh, 2022) to enhance their understanding of what curriculum-based professional learning entails and how it differs from other professional learning they may have experienced in the past.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network moves into a second year, Learning Forward is reflecting on the data, considering feedback from participants, and making plans to improve the network — similar processes to what we encourage the participants to do in their work.

We have a lot of lessons and successes to build on from year one, especially among the teams of educators who have invested time and energy over the first year of their engagement with the network.

We have already seen the power of small changes focused on how educators use high-quality curriculum well. When educators are the ones driving the changes, implementing the curriculum with integrity doesn’t

require additional time. Rather, with these small improvements, educators are better using time.

Carla Richards, a numeracy coach in Metro Nashville Public Schools, summed up the past year of learning and her team’s hopes for the coming year and beyond: “It has been a process . . . We picked up the curriculum and we started working and there was growth, growth among the teachers and growth among the students . . . We grew in certain ways, but there are so many opportunities for more growth.”

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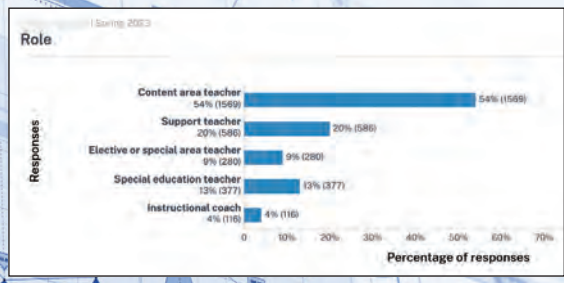
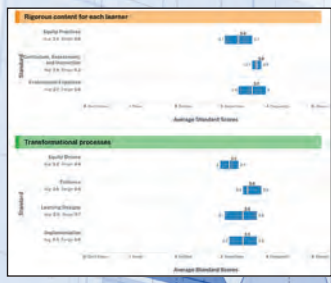
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[NEW] Standards Assessment Inventory

Learning Forward’s Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) is a valid and reliable survey administered to instructional staff that measures alignment of school and system practices to the Standards for Professional Learning.

The SAI provides crucial data on professional learning in your schools to help you identify needs, maximize resources, and focus on areas of greatest priority to improve teaching and students’ success.

Survey responses from your instructional staff reveal the state of high-quality learning in your school, district, or system.



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 the 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 the 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 \$750 plus \$70 per school participating schools
- Systems with more than 15 \$1,000 plus \$70 per school participating schools
- State/provinces with 30% of all schools \$60 per school participating
- States/provinces with less than 30% \$1,000 plus \$70 per school of all schools participating
- 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. Price 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**, senior vice president, professional services, Learning Forward, at tom.manning@learningforward.org.



Teacher expertise makes high-quality curriculum work



BY KATHERINE L. McNEILL AND RENEE AFFOLTER

You walk into the first lesson of a 6th-grade science unit and see participants gathered in small groups sharing experiences about when they or someone they knew healed from an injury. When you ask them what they are doing, they excitedly show you the doctor reports, X-rays, and operation

notes for a middle school student who injured his foot and show you their models full of pictures and words for how they think he healed.

After the students have shared their own healing experiences, the teacher asks them to record questions on sticky notes about the topics they discussed. They pose questions and post them on a big chart: Why did the student lose

feeling in his foot? What holds bones and skin together? Why do some things heal faster than others? What does swelling do?

Then they work with a partner to generate ideas for how they can collect data to answer some of their questions, suggesting options like finding time-lapse video of the healing process and viewing more X-ray images from

Curriculum-based professional learning is not just having teachers read curriculum materials, but rather includes carefully crafted experiences to support their sensemaking, deep understanding of the curriculum and its pedagogy, and ability to transfer that knowledge into practice.

bones in various stages of healing. One student who recently broke her arm asks the teacher if she can bring in the X-ray images from her own experience to help students answer their questions.

In this example, we see many of the instructional shifts advocated for in recent science education reform efforts to make science classes more connected to real-world events and centered around student sensemaking.

Students start by exploring a meaningful anchoring phenomenon — a middle schooler’s foot injury. This is different from a traditional science unit, in which the teacher usually starts by explaining that the class will be learning about the human body systems and cells. In another shift, the teacher elicits and values students’ ideas, related experiences, and questions, rather than looking to an exact set of prompts or a predetermined learning trajectory in a curriculum script.

Although this example may sound like a description of adolescents engaged in a science lesson, the students are 6th-grade teachers experiencing the first lesson in a curriculum-based professional learning approach to using a new science curriculum. This type of professional learning experience, which is new for many teachers, can be critical in supporting instructional shifts called

for in science education reform efforts (Wilson et al., 2015).

High-quality curriculum materials are a key resource for school improvement because they illustrate and support changes in classroom instruction that research shows lead to more student learning (Harris et al., 2015). But curriculum materials alone are not enough. Teachers need support to make the instructional shifts embodied in the curriculum. This can be accomplished through curriculum-based professional learning.

Curriculum-based professional learning leverages high-quality materials, but then layers on top of them important professional learning design elements to support teachers’ reflection on their instructional practice (Short & Hirsh, 2020). Curriculum-based professional learning is not just having teachers read curriculum materials, but rather includes carefully crafted experiences to support their sensemaking, deep understanding of the curriculum and its pedagogy, and ability to transfer that knowledge into practice.

The teachers in the opening vignette were engaged in curriculum-based professional learning as they experienced the anchoring phenomena in which their own questions (e.g., what does swelling do?) and experiences (e.g., the student who broke her arm) help to

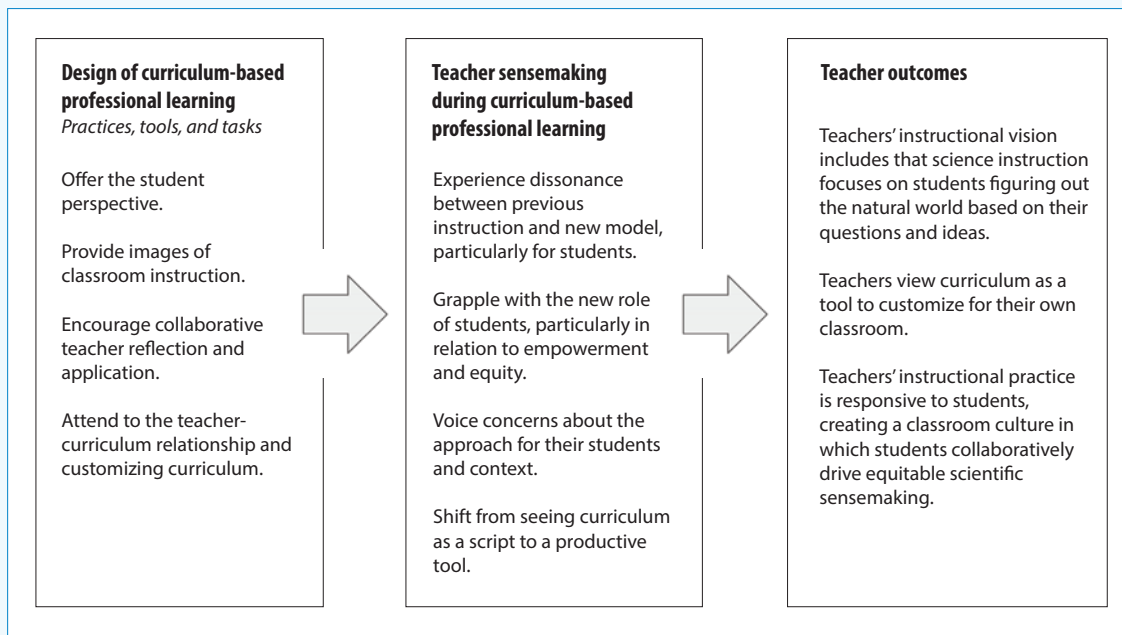
drive the instruction. This instructional model requires that teachers be responsive to their students and use their professional agency to craft a customized enactment of the curriculum materials.

BUILDING CONSISTENCY AND TEACHER AGENCY

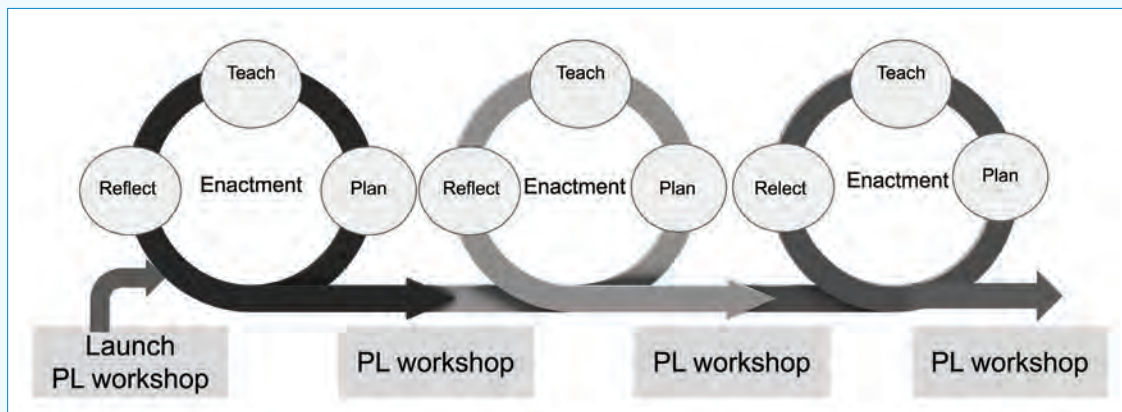
The vignette at the beginning of this article comes from the curriculum-based professional learning we designed and led for the OpenSciEd middle school curriculum. OpenSciEd is a consortium of researchers, developers, and partner states that have developed open source science curriculum and professional learning materials for multiple grade levels (www.opensci.ed.org). The figure on p. 34 includes our model of curriculum-based professional learning for equitable science sensemaking that informed the design of the OpenSciEd professional learning materials.

The box on the left focuses on the design of the curriculum-based professional learning and includes four key elements we integrate to support teachers in rich sensemaking during professional learning. The center box describes the types of teacher discussion, writing, and actions we have observed as teachers engage in sensemaking.

Model of curriculum-based professional learning for equitable science sensemaking



Cycles of OpenSciEd curriculum-based professional learning over time



As reflected in the figure, the kinds of instructional shifts teachers are expected to make with OpenSciEd are challenging. Consequently, during the curriculum-based professional learning, we often observe teachers experiencing dissonance between their

previous instruction and this new model, particularly related to the role of students.

Creating space for teachers to voice concerns and grapple with these new instructional elements is essential for the ultimate desired teacher outcomes

in their vision and instructional practice for science. Those outcomes are summarized in the box on the right in the figure, including teaching with an instructional vision that values students' active engagement and teaching in responsive, equitable ways.

The design elements in the left box are essential to ensuring that this process works as intended and leads to better teaching and learning. In a previous article for *The Learning Professional*, we described the first three design elements in detail (McNeill & Reiser, 2018). Briefly, they are as follows:

- Offering the student perspective means that teachers engage in some of the science lessons from the viewpoint of their students, such as sharing the ideas, language, questions, and emotions their students might have.
- Providing images of classroom instruction includes using classroom video and student artifacts to illustrate what the curriculum can look like in practice.
- Encouraging collaborative teacher reflection and application supports teachers to think critically about the curriculum and what it might look like in their own classroom.

We recently added the fourth design element: attend to the teacher-curriculum relationship and customizing curriculum. In our research with districts implementing the OpenSciEd professional learning (Lowell et al., 2024; McNeill, Affolter et al., 2024), we came to see that some teachers felt like the curriculum adoption was negatively impacting their own agency and professionalism.

For example, one teacher stated he was under the impression that “deviating from the script was this broken commandment,” and another said, “You’re telling us to just follow the script. We feel like robots now” (Lowell et al., 2024, p. 1459). These types of reactions led us to realize the need to talk explicitly with teachers about their essential role in curriculum enactment and the fact that the lessons can and should look different in every classroom as teachers are being responsive to their own students and school contexts.

We integrated this element into the

middle school OpenSciEd professional learning in multiple ways. At the beginning of our work with teachers, we now introduce the idea that it is important to customize the curriculum for equitable sensemaking. We talk about the importance of ensuring students feel known, heard, and supported with access and opportunities for learning that are responsive to them.

We then introduce a model for curricular customization that includes four stages: Establish an equity goal with data, analyze curricular materials to plan customizations, enact and collect student data, and reflect on equity goal and customization (McNeill, Lee et al., 2024).

When we asked teachers after the workshop that included the customization model if their thinking about OpenSciEd had changed at all, the majority of teachers talked about how they appreciated the focus on customization (McNeill, Affolter et al., 2024).

For example, one teacher said, “I appreciated the opportunity to learn about customizing lessons. It made me feel that the curriculum wasn’t as ‘scripted’ (as I thought) and that I can use my judgment to make adjustments to the delivery of the instruction to help my students more readily interact with the content.” Teachers also brought up teacher agency, such as one who said, “I think the customizations will allow teachers to be more autonomous and excited.”

LEARNING CYCLES BUILD CAPACITY AND CONFIDENCE

Because shifts to phenomena-based science curricula are often challenging, it is important that teachers engage in multiple cycles of curriculum-based professional learning over time.

As part of the field test of OpenSciEd, we conducted a study in which we worked with 322 teachers over two years (Lowell & McNeill, 2023), during which teachers participated in multiple cycles of curriculum-based professional learning

(see figure on p. 34). Teachers began with four days of professional learning, which we called Launch PL, during which they explored the OpenSciEd instructional model by engaging with the first science curriculum unit.

After the learning experience, teachers planned, taught, and reflected with colleagues about the curriculum using educative guides. Educative materials are explicitly designed to help teachers understand and apply the curriculum. The schools with the greatest success set aside structured time during the day for teachers to collaboratively plan with grade-level teams for upcoming lessons.

Teachers then returned for two days of professional learning focused on a second science unit and built on teachers’ emerging knowledge and recent reflections. They continued with multiple cycles of curriculum-based professional learning over the two years.

Over the learning cycles, we tracked changes in teachers’ instructional beliefs about science and their confidence in teaching with the OpenSciEd phenomena-based approach (Lowell & McNeill, 2023). Although their beliefs and confidence significantly changed in a positive direction, this did not occur at the same rate.

Teachers’ instructional beliefs changed in the first year, while their confidence in implementing this new instructional vision required more time and continued to increase over the second year. For example, one teacher said, “For me, having the opportunity to attend a second (learning session) in one academic year was pivotal in my own understanding of the curriculum and shifts that OpenSciEd requires. Taking the moment to pause and reflect on the first enactment of units helped me to identify the pitfalls that I was unintentionally creating for myself and for my students. From there, I was able to make those small changes in the following units to avoid those pitfalls.”

These findings reinforce our belief that curriculum-based professional learning should not be one solitary

workshop that teachers experience. Teachers need the opportunity to engage in multiple learning cycles over two or three years to support important shifts in their instructional practice.

HOW INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS SUPPORT TEACHERS’ LEARNING

Instructional leaders play essential roles in curriculum-based professional learning. Not only can they ensure teachers’ access to learning cycles, but they can also convey a clear and consistent vision of curriculum-based professional learning, one that supports teachers’ agency while also ensuring integrity to the vision and instructional model of the curriculum.

We saw the importance of this kind of leadership in a contrasting case study of two middle schools implementing new curricular materials and engaging in curriculum-based professional learning (Lowell et al., 2024). In one school, leaders messaged the importance of teachers’ voices and decision-making in customizing and enacting the curriculum materials in their classrooms.

For example, one instructional leader said, “High-quality instructional materials need to be positioned as a primary resource that teachers adapt based on the needs of the students in front of them ... By both centering the teachers’ role of differentiating a primary resource and creating a culture where teachers feel safe to try out new innovations, it messages to teachers that they are professionals who are trusted and valued, which, in turn, results in additional agency and ownership in the work.”

Not surprisingly, the teachers in that school felt invested in the customization and enactment of the new curriculum with their students.

In contrast, at the other school, teachers reported that their leaders saw the curriculum as a script and that they felt like robots. This reduced teachers’ feelings of professional autonomy, and many teachers felt negatively about the curriculum.

As such, it is important that the vision and messaging from leadership align with the design feature in curriculum-based professional learning focused on the teacher-curriculum relationship and the importance of customizing curriculum to leverage and support students and the local context.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS TO BE INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERTS

There is an inextricable link between teacher professionalization and equity-centered science classrooms (Miller et al., 2024). Engaging in high-quality curriculum-based professional learning over time that positions teachers as experts who need to customize the curriculum for their own classrooms can support teacher agency and key instructional shifts in science.

Teachers need this support for their own professional growth and to support the development of instruction in which students’ questions and ideas drive science learning as the classroom community engages in rich sensemaking about phenomena.

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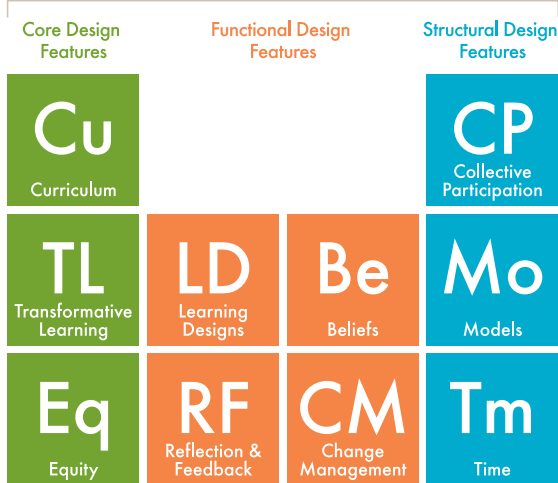
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The Elements

of Curriculum-Based Professional Learning



The Essentials



HOW CAN WE MAKE CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WORK BETTER FOR TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS?

Carnegie Corporation of New York's "The Elements" framework identifies how curriculum-based professional learning anchored in high-quality curriculum materials allows teachers to experience the instruction their students will receive and change their instructional practices, leading to better student outcomes.



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Putting multilingual students at the center of curriculum-based professional learning

BY CASEY McALDUFF AND LYN WESTERGARD

In a district office on a too-hot Saturday and already a few weeks into their summer break, four teachers are huddled around a piece of chart paper, each holding a different colored marker. They've been reading and discussing Sandra Cisneros' book, *Hairs/Pelitos*, and are collaborating on a poster that uses figurative language to describe

a character from the text. It's almost lunch, but these teachers, along with an additional 30 teacher participants, are focused and ready to create something meaningful.

The participating teachers are preparing to lead this same activity with their elementary students who are newcomers to the United States. The district, which is a large urban district

in Nevada, includes newcomer students who recently arrived from 133 different countries and speak over 110 languages.

To ensure these students have high-quality learning opportunities, the district partnered with curriculum designers from WestEd's English Learner and Migrant Education Services team to design situated, district-specific upper elementary

newcomer curriculum accompanied by curriculum-based professional learning.

Together, the district and WestEd have created two academically rigorous curricular units for newcomer students that offer high challenge and high support. One is a language arts-focused unit that welcomes and orients students to their new school and country; the other is a STEM unit that focuses on food and nutrition. Both units center student interaction and dialogue and provide language scaffolding.

The curriculum-based professional learning is an essential part of the units. Consistent with the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), teachers engage in interactive, meaningful, and sustained learning that builds their expertise through deep connections to the content and the way students experience it. Data collected before and after professional learning show that teachers have a more accurate understanding of best practices for teaching multilingual learners after participating.

FLEXIBLE FOR DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Because of the diversity of elementary school structures across the district, the curriculum is intentionally designed to be flexible for many different contexts. For example, the majority of schools in the district assign a language specialist to implement the curriculum during a dedicated support block for newcomer students.

The two-unit design amplifies the core curriculum so that schools can have the flexibility to implement the units in the way that is most effective for their students. Regardless of how a school chooses to implement the units, the curriculum provides newcomer students with the opportunity to learn both language and content in tandem.

This work is rooted in the understanding that to create equitable

learning opportunities for students, teachers need research-based, job-embedded professional learning paired with access to high-quality educative curricular materials that support teacher professional learning and growth (Davis et al., 2017).

Effective curriculum-based professional learning should promote the development of teaching expertise as well as teachers' autonomy to know and adapt the curriculum to meet their students' needs. Successful implementation of a curriculum does not happen when teachers follow a script. Rather, it occurs when teachers "understand (the curriculum) deeply and use it with intentionality and professional judgment, based on their particular context and the needs of their students" (Learning Forward, 2018).

To meet these criteria, WestEd and our partner district identified three essential practices for curriculum-based professional learning for newcomer multilingual learners. These practices reflect Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which ensure high-quality professional learning by focusing on rigorous content for each learner, transformational processes, and conditions for success. (See the table on p. 40.)

According to Shulman (1987), effective teaching requires a blend of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and an understanding of students' contexts. This integration enables teachers to transform their expertise into meaningful learning for students. It is therefore important that the professional learning that accompanies the curriculum seeks to integrate teacher knowledge of the subject matter, teacher knowledge of effective teaching practices, and teacher knowledge about their students.

This is especially important for teachers who are new to working with newcomer multilingual learners because they are charged with simultaneously

scaffolding students' academic, linguistic, and social and emotional development.

The coherence between our curriculum-based professional learning practices and the Standards for Professional Learning frames signals the importance of a consistent stance toward the use of educative materials. The educative curriculum, coupled with the professional learning sessions, guides teachers in an exploration of the theoretical foundations of quality learning for newcomer multilingual learners while also engaging them in evidence-based, hands-on, meaningful learning experiences. This approach fosters a sustainable model of professional growth and enhances overall instructional effectiveness.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS:

Layered and ongoing implementation support

Standards within the Conditions for Success frame describe features of the professional learning's context, structures, culture, and climate that lead to success for educators and students (Learning Forward, 2022). They explain the importance of resources, leadership, collaboration, and equity, all of which must be robust over time.

The newcomer curriculum-based professional learning embodies these standards by providing multiple layers of support over multiple years, all guided by the needs and individual contexts of teachers (Learning Forward, 2018).

At our partner district, this process is structured to ensure that educators are well-prepared, supported, and continuously engaged in professional growth. It begins with several districtwide sessions to develop teachers' expertise about working with multilingual newcomers by reinforcing the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary to effectively implement the curriculum.

3 ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Standards for Professional Learning frame	Curriculum-based professional learning practice	Description of practice
Conditions for Success	Layered and ongoing implementation support	Teachers engage in ongoing learning about the curriculum over time, and district leaders actively participate in and support the learning.
Rigorous Content for Each Learner	Theoretical foundations of the curriculum	Teachers have deep understanding of the theoretical foundations of quality learning for newcomer multilingual learners.
Transformational Processes	Sociocultural approach to professional learning	Teachers engage in meaningful, hands-on learning about the curriculum that mirrors and models effective instructional practices for students.

During these sessions, which are facilitated by the curriculum creators, teachers, administrators, and English learner specialists experience the curriculum, participate in interactive discussions, and practice facilitating the learning tasks that students will engage with, ensuring they are prepared to bring these lessons to life.

This heterogenous participant base allows for long-term capacity building, with district and school leaders first attending the professional learning as participants and then through the process of apprenticeship and partnership, facilitating future professional learning sessions as needed.

In recognition of the dynamism and complexity of curriculum implementation, teachers also participate in ongoing professional learning communities (PLCs) facilitated by the district’s English learner division leaders. These communities take place at the district level and are open to all educators implementing the curriculum.

The PLCs meet both in person and virtually and provide a space for teachers to dive deeper into their individual contexts of implementation. Participants discuss successes and challenges, share insights, and collaboratively problem-solve. They engage in professional readings that inform their practice and help them stay current with the latest research and methodologies in working with newcomer multilingual learners. PLCs also serve as a space for teachers to plan for future instruction, ensuring that their implementation of the curriculum is both strategic and responsive to student needs.

RIGOROUS CONTENT FOR EACH LEARNER:

Theoretical foundations of the curriculum

The Rigorous Content for Each Learner standards describe the essential focus of the professional learning that improves outcomes for students

(Learning Forward, 2022). High-quality curriculum and professional expertise connected to the curriculum are key aspects. As the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard explains, educators gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum when provided time to explore it, gauge its progression over time, and understand its alignment to student learning standards.

Educators’ understanding of the theoretical principles that underpin the curriculum is a key part of this expertise. A main principle for newcomer students — and therefore the corresponding professional learning and curriculum — is that all students deserve rigorous educational experiences, meaning there is no need to wait for newcomer students to reach a certain language ability or proficiency level before engaging with rigorous content. Instead, it is the teacher’s facilitation that provides the learning opportunities necessary for students to learn both

Conversation cards with formulaic expressions



What you can say	How you can respond
I feel _____ when ...	Me, too. I also sometimes feel _____ When ... Oh, really. I don't feel _____ when ... I feel _____ when ...
Partner A	Partner B
When I first came to the United States, I felt _____ and also ... Later, I felt _____ because ... Sometimes, I also felt _____ when Now, I feel _____ because ... How did you feel?	Me, too. I felt ... I also felt _____ when ... Oh, really. I didn't feel ... I also feel _____ when ...

language and content simultaneously (Walqui & van Lier, 2010).

In alignment with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, rigorous content must be provided to each learner, regardless of language proficiency level. Professional learning that emphasizes these equity-focused standards equips educators with practices to integrate complex, grade-level content with language development.

An example of this in practice can be seen within the newcomer STEM unit, where a teacher introduces a lesson on fractions by using visual models and collaborative group work. Rather than simplifying the content, the teacher scaffolds the lesson with language supports, enabling newcomer students to engage meaningfully with both the STEM concepts and the language for STEM.

This approach exemplifies how rigorous content can be implemented equitably, ensuring that students

are supported with the tools to succeed in both content and language development simultaneously.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES: Sociocultural approach to professional learning

Standards within the Transformational Processes frame delve into the design or the “how” of professional learning, including practices and mindsets. A foundational element of the district’s newcomer curriculum, and the professional learning to support it, is the sociocultural approach to learning, which emphasizes learners engaging with content, each other, and the world around them in an interconnected way.

As part of this approach, dialogue, academic discourse, and supportive interactions are essential, as they provide opportunities for students to practice language, negotiate meaning, and build on their existing knowledge,

all in the context of positive social relationships.

The newcomer curriculum is designed to maximize student talk and leverage the power of dialogic teaching, where students learn through interactive and collaborative discourse (Gibbons, 2015). In practice, this means creating classroom environments where student dialogue is a central feature, not added on as an afterthought or left to chance. Lessons within the curriculum are structured to include think-pair-share activities, group discussions, and opportunities for students to learn and use new language in context.

For example, as students are preparing to write multiparagraph personal narratives about their feelings and experiences adjusting to a new country, they engage in a series of collaborative tasks with peers that are scaffolded with language structures and practice.

Students are provided with formulaic expressions (frames to

**Newcomer Welcoming Unit PD
Quick Reflection at the Start**

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Draw a quick sketch of your vision of quality teaching for English Learners, especially for newcomer students in your classroom. (If you'd like to use words to amplify your image, please feel free.)

Before professional learning: This classroom sketch done before the professional learning depicts the teacher's initial beliefs about quality teaching for newcomer multilingual learners.

**Newcomer Welcoming Unit PD
Quick Reflection at the End**

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. After engaging in this professional learning, draw a quick sketch of your current vision of quality teaching for English Learners, especially for newcomer students in your classroom. (If you'd like to use words to amplify your image, please feel free.)

In a paragraph, describe how your vision of quality teaching for English Learners, especially for newcomer students, may have changed and/or have been reinforced.

- What is the teacher now doing in the classroom?
- What are the students now doing in the classroom?
- How have your ideas for topics, themes, texts, tasks, and/or materials been changed or reinforced?

In my vision of quality teaching for EL's the teacher engaging the students in meaningful activities that promote discourse and engagement. They are guiding and supporting students through tasks that grow in complexity. Students

After professional learning: This classroom sketch done after the professional learning depicts the teacher's revised vision of quality teaching for newcomer multilingual learners.

support the language of the task) to have a meaningful exchange about the topic that builds on their existing knowledge. This activity requires a dialogic exchange: One student expresses an idea (e.g., “I felt ___ when ...”) and their partner must listen and then provide a response (e.g., “Me, too. I also felt ...” or “Oh, really. I didn’t feel ...”). The figure on p. 41 shows conversation cards from the lesson that provide these language structures for students to use in discussions and later in grade-level-appropriate writing tasks.

Just as the newcomer curriculum is designed with a sociocultural approach, so is the professional learning that accompanies the curriculum. Educators participate in the learning tasks of the curriculum, discuss the tasks’ theoretical foundations, and practice facilitating the curriculum with one another, with dialogic interaction at the center.

For example, they engage in professional readings and discussions with colleagues designed to help them develop a deep understanding of the importance of talk in a classroom, even or especially for students who have not yet attained proficiency with English.

Through this model, practitioners learn through talk in the same way their students do and develop a vision for what high-quality teaching for newcomer multilingual learners looks like by engaging in collegial, pedagogical conversations. For example, after teachers have experienced a portion of the curriculum, they reflect on the relationship between pacing and purpose and consider how they may adjust pacing for their unique classroom context.

Importantly, teachers have the chance to interact with the curriculum developers, who also serve as professional learning facilitators. This allows time for curriculum designers and teachers to iterate and problem-solve together, as well as for the curriculum designers to highlight key components of the curriculum, such as the ways in which

the curriculum encourages students to draw on their home languages and cultural backgrounds as they engage in meaningful classroom talk.

IMPACT ON TEACHER PRACTICE

The curriculum-based professional learning has been positively received by teachers and appears to be supporting shifts in practice. In a follow-up feedback survey, educators were asked: What best supported your learning about creating quality learning opportunities for newcomer students? Responses were centered on the appreciation of hands-on learning and engaging in the tasks within the curriculum.

One teacher wrote that what supported their learning was “allowing us to ‘be the student’ and imagine what it would be like to implement this in my own classroom. I was able to see and experience the scaffolded progression and understand the importance of each step of the process.”

As part of the pre- and post-survey reflection, educators drew a quick sketch of their current vision of quality teaching for newcomer students. The presurvey sketches focused heavily on teaching vocabulary and the teacher being the center of the classroom (see the top figure on p. 42).

After participating in the professional learning session, the sketches drastically transformed. The post-learning sketches focused heavily on students actively engaged in rigorous instruction through academic discourse, and the teacher moved into the role of facilitator, guiding students, and providing scaffolds that support students’ language and content development.

For example, one teacher’s post-reflection noted, “In my vision of quality teaching for English learners, the teacher (is) engaging the students in meaningful activities that promote discourse and engagement. They are guiding and supporting students through tasks that grow in complexity”

(see the lower figure on p. 42).

As teachers continue to learn about and implement the newcomer curriculum units, we see that they are actively engaged in developing expertise and offering high-quality learning opportunities to their newcomer students. The district’s comprehensive support system — from experiential, interactive professional learning sessions to ongoing PLCs — ensures that these educators are well-prepared and continuously supported.

This commitment to teacher expertise and professional growth reaffirms the district’s dedication to educational equity and excellence and can ultimately translate into rigorous and meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

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Professional learning *lays the foundation* for new curriculum



BY JODY GUARINO, LAUREN WEISSKIRK, JOHN DRAKE, AND LYNSEY GIBBONS

Many educators are familiar with the concept of “building the plane while flying it” because we often have to learn new curricula and instructional practices while we are implementing them with students.

But what if we could do it another

way? How would instruction and student learning improve if we made the time to really understand and practice a new curriculum before implementing it in classrooms with students?

In Orange County, California, we are finding out by testing an approach of preimplementation professional

learning for a full year before applying a new curriculum.

Our team at Orange County Department of Education’s Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Leadership Collaborative has long supported efforts to improve how districts identify, select, and implement high-quality instructional materials. Over

3 CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMING LEARNING WITH INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

An instructional vision:

- Creates a clear and common definition of what high-quality teaching and learning looks like in each content area.
- Presents a future state that stakeholders across the school system can get behind and builds momentum for change.
- Ensures coherence across multiple decisions, including the curriculum, types of professional learning, coaching model, and assessment practices.

A robust adoption process:

- Examines data.
- Sets goals and timelines for the adoption process.

- Establishes what key staff members (e.g., selection committee members, pilot classroom teachers, and school board members) need to learn to identify materials that advance the district's goals and instructional vision.

Professional learning:

- Supports actualization of the vision of quality instruction and the selected curriculum.
- Builds educators' knowledge of and application of the curriculum.
- Provides ongoing, job-embedded support across roles.
- Fosters a culture of collaboration and inquiry.

the past decade, we have advocated for inclusive adoption practices (Guarino et al., 2018) and shared how thoughtful approaches to curriculum selection can transform district behavior and student outcomes (EdReports, 2018).

Now, as districts across California prepare for upcoming curriculum adoptions in math, we are finding that there is a pressing need to get the conditions for a successful implementation in place in advance. One of those conditions is curriculum-based professional learning, an approach to educator learning that is grounded in instructional materials and connected to teachers' daily work with them.

Along with two other conditions — setting an instructional vision and preparing for a robust adoption process — we believe that investing in curriculum-based professional learning from the very beginning — in the phase before curriculum implementation — will allow districts to reap benefits for years to come.

SETTING THE CONDITIONS

To understand our curriculum and professional learning focus,

it's important to understand our philosophy and goals. Our team at the Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Leadership Collaborative believes in a future in which all students experience excellent instruction, joy, and meaningful interactions with adults who believe in their potential. We envision that all classrooms will be environments in which students are engaged in rich discourse, have ample opportunities to make sense of the discipline, and understand the purpose and process of increasingly complex disciplinary ideas.

For this to happen, we believe teachers need to have the tools and resources to make instructional decisions based on students' current thinking and understanding.

High-quality instructional materials are a key component but are insufficient on their own. They have to be grounded in a coherent instructional vision, a robust adoption process, and systems of professional learning for educators. (See box above.)

Professional learning is a critical part of capacity building for making the instructional shifts called for in the instructional vision and the high-

quality materials. But the typical professional learning approach for curriculum adoption — one to two days of training from the curriculum company — is insufficient for ensuring educators understand the curriculum structures and how to use them.

Successful districts and schools are continually engaged in a process of inquiring into teaching and learning. We know from research that educators need opportunities to regularly learn alongside each other about teaching the curriculum (Fredston-Hermann & McCormick, 2024). District leaders should plan for ongoing, embedded educator learning by designing the collaborative structures, budgeting for resources, and orienting existing professional learning teams to help educators critically interrogate teaching practice to reflect on teaching and plan their future work with students.

Defining a new system of professional learning means looking closely at how all adults in the system — including teachers, school leaders, coaches, and district leaders — build the knowledge and skills they need to positively impact students. A coherent system is designed so that the learning

will deepen and build on itself over multiple years, and there are multiple learning opportunities that include collaboration time, school site staff learning sessions, and instructional coaching.

LEARNING FROM A LAB SITE

Identifying a lab site or a pilot school is a great way to start experimenting with structures for facilitating deep and collaborative curriculum-based professional learning. We have found that districts have the ability to more quickly innovate, pivot, and apply learning in a smaller context. In these environments, leaders can consider important content and design features and ultimately use that knowledge in scaling up the changes to additional schools.

The first step at the lab site is for district and school leadership to take stock of current structures for collaboration. For example, district leaders should ask:

- What structures exist for teachers and leaders to come together to talk about teaching?
- Who currently facilitates learning in these structures, and what are their goals for supporting educators' collaboration?
- To what extent are interactions focused on teaching, students, the content, and the curriculum?

Based on the answers to these questions, the district may find that it needs to create additional structures for educator learning. To create consistency and coherence, the district may need to hire facilitators (such as content-focused coaches) and plan for their professional learning. The district may also need to consider whether and how accountability structures like teacher evaluations align with the goal of supporting teachers to analyze teaching and, if they don't, how to revise them.

As districts learn from the lab site collaborative structures, they should

be continuously learning and applying these lessons to their implementation strategy. Along the way, they should ask themselves: What can be put into place now to support the adoption and implementation at other schools? What will be necessary in six months? A year from now?

AN EXAMPLE OF COLLABORATIVE CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Our team at the Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Leadership Collaborative is working with Tustin Unified School District to implement curriculum-based professional learning before what is traditionally considered to be an adoption year so that the district's new math curriculum can take hold and drive positive outcomes for students. Our collective work together is rooted in a deep understanding of the current state of teaching and learning in the district, its instructional vision, and the research about what makes educator professional learning powerful.

One elementary school serves as a lab site where everyone is positioned as a learner: students, teachers, coaches, administrators, and teacher educators. The team at the lab school, which is composed of math teacher educators, the principal, an instructional coach, and teachers, designs and engages in curriculum-based professional learning to support the implementation of problem-based materials in mathematics. This learning extends across the year through monthly staff learning sessions, weekly grade-level collaboration, and in-classroom coaching, all grounded in the use of the curriculum materials.

For example, for each math unit, grade-level teams work together to understand the goals of the unit as well as the pedagogical practices that facilitate student learning. They begin by completing the end-of-unit

assessment so they are knowledgeable about the targets they're working toward and discussing key concepts and skills that students will be expected to know by the end of the unit.

Then they read the math of the unit, along with prior learning they are building on and future learning they are building toward so they can think about students' learning trajectories over time and understand how to differentiate instruction for students with unfinished teaching or those ready for extension.

Next, they look at the language that will be introduced and used within the unit, including both mathematical vocabulary and language functions such as explaining one's thinking and justifying a conjecture. They identify strategies to support the development of these types of language. The next step includes understanding the mathematical progression of the unit by looking carefully at the progression within each subunit (an organizational feature of the instructional materials) and describing the progression of concepts, skills, and language.

As the work continues over the course of the year, instructional leaders from across the district observe professional learning at the lab site so that they can see productive collaboration and engagement and develop a shared vision of high-quality curriculum-based professional learning.

The lab site also helps district leaders understand conditions necessary for successful implementation of the curriculum at scale, including: the level of knowledge an instructional coach needs to support productive collaboration among teachers; the role of an instructional leader in curriculum implementation; leader pedagogies that support high-quality math instruction; and space and structures needed for student learning to occur. This knowledge can then inform district decision-making such as allocation of resources for coach learning or

How coaches learn about curriculum: An example from Tustin, California

At the kickoff of Tustin Unified School District's Instructional Coach Camp, participants sat at tables of six, each holding a card with unique information that would become necessary for the group to solve a math problem. As each person shared the information on their card, the group members thought about how it fit with information they already had and worked together to synthesize and record their ideas. The room buzzed with energy and interaction. Some groups cheered after solving the problem.

Next, teams engaged in a debrief, reflecting and responding to the following questions: How did you engage with each other to solve the problem? What were all of the things you did? What were some benefits of working and learning together? How would this experience have been different if you had to solve the problem on your own? Participants

talked about the belief that everyone is a sense-maker and the importance of listening to make sense. They shared ways they worked together and reflected on their collaboration.

This activity set the stage for how the group would work, both as a community and with teachers they served, over the course of the next year. It was designed to mimic the engagement, interaction, and experience foundational to the learning goals for students to facilitate the development of a shared vision of instruction among the participants that could ultimately be shared across the district.

Coaches appreciated the experience, noting the interdependence of team members as they worked together. Everyone shared ideas, and the ideas were all valued. Several people tried the activity with groups they lead, using it to launch teamwork.

principal learning or structures and processes for grade-level team collaboration.

At the same time the learning team engages at the lab site, administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers on special assignment from across the district engage in ongoing, job embedded parallel learning. They participate monthly in a curriculum leadership academy so they will have a set of tools and pedagogies to lean into as they lead their respective sites.

For example, in one early session, administrators and coaches watched a 10-minute video clip of a 4th-grade team of teachers, principal, and instructional coach engaged in doing a math problem and talking about the upcoming fraction unit. Team members were asked to focus on the collaboration among the educators in the video, including how collaboration supports everyone's learning and how educators in different roles encouraged it.

They discussed these topics after watching, occasionally pausing, rewatching, and unpacking details. This

provided an opportunity for educators across the district to construct a shared vision for collaboration as a space for learning and consider the roles of each stakeholder, including instructional coaches, whose role is new.

Coaches and teachers on special assignment also participate in a weekly observation of grade-level collaboration at the lab site. This observation is carefully planned with a pedagogical tool or move in mind, such as looking at the questions and follow-up prompts the facilitator asks of teachers when the group is reviewing student data.

Another learning opportunity for teachers on special assignment and instructional coaches is instructional coach camp (see box above), where they continue to learn in biweekly sessions, doing math together, understanding the progressions, and developing a core set of instructional practices.

START LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Learning from the lab school has started to spread. Grade-level

collaboration across elementary sites has started to look different. Some teams have started immersing themselves in the coherence of the state math standards as they unpack mathematical ideas and see the progression within and across grades. Other teams have started bringing student work and looking at whether it reflects the grade-level standards.

Teams are becoming more collaborative and more focused on teacher learning and student learning. We expect this trend to grow after instructional materials are selected and teams are leaning into the materials and implementing them with students.

For many educators, this kind of curriculum-based professional learning is new. Most of us didn't experience this type of teaching and learning when we were students, or even earlier in our careers as educators.

We know that curriculum matters, and high-quality instructional materials are important. But just as important is how those materials are used. Collaborative, curriculum-based

professional learning can help us ensure the materials are used well by grounding new information and pedagogies in the daily work of teaching.

Districts in multiple states, including California, are slated to choose new curriculum next year. We encourage them not to wait to get the conditions in place that will ensure that they select, support, and see results from this important investment. We have learned over the past decade about the importance of coherent systems and structures and about the time it takes to put them in place.

We encourage all educational systems to start planning and building the necessary conditions — including

professional learning — now to ensure new curriculum investments will lead to the instructional transformations that teachers want and students deserve.

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STRATEGIES FOR COLLECTING AND APPLYING DATA

“When educators develop a learning mindset, involve everyone in data gathering and its use, and make it easy and more routine to collect data and take action, they are better able to quickly detect problem areas and pivot,” writes Tochukwu Okoye (p. 54). That takes intentional strategies for not only collecting data but applying it. Okoye offers six steps to make data actionable.



‘It’s not about perfection; it’s about reflection’

Q&A with Juliana Urtubey

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Juliana Urtubey, the 2021 National Teacher of the Year, is an advocate for a joyous and just education for all students. Trained as a bilingual special education teacher, she is now a program director at the Arizona K12 Center, a board member for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and a member of President Biden’s Advisory Commission on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics. Urtubey will be a keynote speaker on Dec. 9 at the Learning Forward 2024 Annual Conference in Aurora, Colorado.



Hear more from Juliana Urtubey at Learning Forward’s Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado. Urtubey’s keynote speech on Dec. 11 is titled “Cultivating a Joyous and Just Education for All.” It will be followed by a ticketed Q&A session with Urtubey. To register for the conference and sign up for the Q&A session, visit conference.learningforward.org

What is the joyous and just education framework about?

The joyous and just framework is about humanizing the process of building learning communities. It’s about developing spaces that are inclusive and celebratory of everyone’s identities and strengths. It is inspired by my experience as a classroom teacher and from co-constructing a school garden with our students, their families, and our staff, which taught me a lot of really important lessons.

In the framework, there are five *promesas*, or promises. They are essentially commitments that I, as an educator, make to my learning communities. These grow out of things my students have taught me. One of the *promesas* is recognizing brilliance. It encourages teachers to go deeper than acknowledging students’ assets to recognizing students’ brilliance. For example, I had a student who helped me understand that “English language learner” was a term that was much too small for her brilliance. She inspired me to launch the concept of

students being linguistically gifted in recognition of the fact that our communities’ languages are essential and that multilingual learning is powerful.

The joyous and just framework is not just about students. Building the garden taught me a lot about learning from multiple generations, inviting family members to be meaningful parts of our community, and encouraging educators to look for the informal ways this can happen. So often, we invite families to come in and we talk about how to teach their children at home. But we miss opportunities to create trusting relationships where parents can recognize and unveil their strengths to us. Once we create informal ways to invite those skills and gifts into our schools and we have the mindset to recognize those skills, beautiful things can happen.

In these last two years, since my Teacher of the Year service year ended, I’ve been thinking a lot about how to move the teaching profession forward and about what a joyous and just system looks like for educators,

schools, districts, and states. The framework is really about how to create a joyous and just system for us all.

How do joy and justice go together?

Joy is, for me, not only an end product or a destination, but a process. A commitment to that joy is intertwined with a commitment to justice because everyone in the community deserves to learn in joy — not just students, but also teachers and administrators and everyone else.

The glue that holds joy and justice together is collective wellness. Collective wellness requires thinking about what everybody in your community needs to be well — including educators — and building healthy systems to address it. It means looking around your campus and asking: Who are the people who are not experiencing joy? Who are the people who are not experiencing justice? Why? And what can you do now with your school, team, and students to change that?

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We all have opportunities to address joy and justice in our own realms of control. Teachers are responsible within our own context, not just for our students, but for colleagues. For example, what can we do to really invite new and early career teachers into the joy? And what can we do to give voice to policies and practices that help sustain and retain those teachers?

Administrators have a responsibility for joy and justice in their realms of control, too, and that means supporting their teachers. When I look at the data across districts and states in our country, we don't see teacher attrition everywhere. We don't see it in healthy, collaborative schools. In schools that have systems of support from a teacher's first day on campus and have avenues for teacher voice and leadership, we're not losing teachers. We have teachers who are happy and are staying because they sustain the work collectively.

In the last two years, I have been thinking and learning a lot about what a joyous and just education means not only for schools, but district and state systems. For example, administrators have some of the hardest jobs. We could have better systems to liberate their time to be more present in the instruction and culture of a school so that they can jump into classrooms and spend time. Often, one of the missing pieces is systems for teacher leadership. That can help cultivate joy and justice for teachers *and* for administrators.

It sounds like you are describing systems that acknowledge everyone's strengths and needs. Do you think of this as an equity-centered framework?

The two elements of joy and justice are critical in bringing equity forward. I think equity is less of a paradigm and more of a mindset. It's about asking the essential questions about what students need. And joy and justice provide entry points.

I don't think anyone ever completely does equity work to complete perfection. There's no such thing (as a perfectly equitable system). We constantly have new students, and what equity looks like for them is going to be different. We're always learning and shifting, with changing students and changing resources.

That focus on process is important because you'll see how quickly people shift out of the work when they focus on the fact that it's not done. You'll see how they become negative about the disparities and the scale of the work yet to do. I understand those challenges to be real, but progress is possible. I'm interested in seeing places where kids have a sense of liberation and autonomy in their learning, where they don't feel like they have to dim down their languages, their histories, their families, to be able to have access to resources. Take me there to learn from those teachers.

Educators have told me that the joyous and just framework helps people who feel pushed away (from other equity efforts) because they're not quite at a level of fully understanding what inclusive practices can look like. It gives them an entry point that is humbly humanizing students, families, and our overall practice. My framework shows them, "OK, I can do these things, and these things are equity. Let me dive deeper into them," and they start to shift.

A lot of your current work focuses on teacher voice, leadership, and growth. How does professional learning support the development of teachers and the profession as a whole?

Part of the justice for educators is that we're seen as experts in our work, and if we're not experts, that we're given the support to be able to become accomplished.

Professional learning has to be a journey, and it has to have the heartbeat of reflection through and

through. I don't care if it's your first day in a classroom or your millionth — there is power in reflecting on your teaching and students' learning. As a teacher, I have to de-center myself and center my students in what I'm learning. I have to connect what I'm learning to how it will change practice for my students. And that's only possible through reflection.

This is something I focus on in my work with teacher residency programs. In these programs, new teachers do a full year of student teaching while they're doing the first year of graduate studies, then a second year finishing graduate studies while teaching with an emergency certification, and then they are licensed teachers in year three.

The first-year teaching residents I work with do a lot of reflecting on how the teaching practices they're learning about can look in the classroom. But when they talk about that with their supervising teachers, the reactions are mixed. Sometimes those conversations are very positive because the veteran teacher has the disposition that they can also learn from a beginning teacher.

But sometimes the residents come back to me feeling quite deflated because the supervising teacher doesn't have that disposition or that willingness to deepen their practice. I'm helping the program develop how to work with supervising teachers and creating a parallel reflection process in which the experienced teacher is learning how to articulate their practice, analyze their decisions, review student learning, and reflect on next steps alongside the new teacher.

It has to be systematic. I know that we can't expect it to just happen. And part of that is reiterating with the supervising teachers: What are our universal expectations of best practices? I see this in the National Board Certification. When teachers achieve their certification, the way they talk about their practice shifts because they understand they've gotten to the point of expertise by reflecting deeply

on what their students need and where they need to go in their learning.

How do you foster reflection among new teachers?

One of the phrases that really resonates with the (novice) resident teachers I’ve taught is: It’s not about perfection; it’s about reflection. I tell them, “You don’t have to have this down perfectly by tomorrow. But what you do in the classroom tomorrow really matters, and you can make a decision to shift your practice bit by bit.”

In the induction and mentoring programs at the Arizona K12 Center, Kathleen Paulsen, assistant director of induction and mentoring, helps educators and mentors see that progress over time by encouraging mentors to give the new teacher a portfolio of their work together after

finishing their first year. This (gesture) says, “Here are the goals you were working on and evidence of the way you talked about your practice. Look at how it shifted across the school year.”

We also share that progress. Kathleen runs the Arizona Induction Mentor Network. All the districts (in that network) come together twice a year, and we talk about the program with leaders from the districts. At the last network meeting, part of their work is to dive into the portfolios that the mentors have created, and they get to read, firsthand from the mentors, the things that are working, the growth, the celebration, and the human story of why the attrition rates are dropping. Our 2022 data showed that 87% of the teachers returned for year two, which is really great.

What message do you want to share

with educators about professional learning and growth?

I think that in most professions, but especially education, we’re still in the habit of hiding our vulnerabilities. I’ve embraced my vulnerability as a strength. I believe that we need to name the barriers to equity and then find a collective way to be aware of them and understand how our practice clicks into that larger work. Professional learning is so important for teachers because it makes us realize that the puzzle piece we’re clicking in to this larger web is really essential. Now it’s time to own our vulnerabilities and plan for the future, but also bask in the ways that we are contributing to this future already.

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6 steps for putting data into action

BY TOCHUKWU OKOYE

Data is ubiquitous and inseparable from the human experience. It constantly informs and transforms our interactions, decisions, and understanding. If the total amount of all the data created daily was printed on paper, it would fill a library the size of 110 Libraries of Congress (Johnston, 2012; Duarte, 2024).

As a senior research consultant for an education market research and social impact consulting firm, I have guided professional learning organizations in implementing continuous improvement strategies and frameworks while researching data-driven decision-making. This has fueled my enthusiasm about the transformative power of data in education and learning.

Schools and the broader education system can benefit by embracing a data-backed culture that integrates science into decision-making, grounded in evidence rather than assumptions. This is essential for continuous improvement. Through my work, I have identified six strategies to help educators build an insight-driven culture for improving student outcomes.

When educators develop a learning mindset, involve everyone in data gathering and its use, and make it easy and more routine to collect data and take action, they are better able to quickly detect problem areas and pivot.

When schools set aside time to discuss their data, leveraging existing expertise and technology to make sense of it, they can gain valuable insights and are more equipped to learn from it and make meaningful changes. By carrying out those strategies, teachers and teacher leaders can spread the ideas that work within their school system and beyond.

MAKING DATA ACTIONABLE FOR EVERYONE

Data in itself is insufficient. It only becomes useful once it tells a story and is actionable. In other words, data and insights are two sides of the same coin. Businesses are quick to see this connection because they use data to optimize their sales and marketing engines to increase revenue or personalize user experience. While many industries capitalize on data for improvement, the education sector has yet to fully come on board.

Education systems must regularly measure student performance, but the purpose is more often for accountability rather than learning. The Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has given schools some flexibility over what they measure.

The legislation has moved away from prescriptive and punitive accountability systems limited to test scores as a measure of school performance to broader measures of student success. While this represents a significant step, teachers are not using data as extensively as they could.

When data is used, it tends to focus on student outcomes rather than informing ongoing practices.

The issue with data focused on student outcomes or accountability is that it is received too late in the cycle and can be insufficient for informing meaningful improvements. Conversely, data for improvement should occur frequently and reveal processes that produce the desired outcome.

A strategy that provides data for learning over accountability is the best way to answer questions such as: What do we want to achieve? Are we seeing what we want to see in terms of adult practice and student experiences? What is or is not working, for whom, and under what conditions?

COLLECTING ACCURATE AND USEFUL DATA

Data for learning already exists in various pockets across the instructional core: Teachers make observations, students assess their knowledge, and technology and devices gather information. This often occurs in silos, with teachers lacking the time or expertise to effectively use or process this data. Or the data arrives too late to influence teaching practices.

Teachers may additionally feel reluctant to provide honest survey responses, fearing that the information may be used against them in some way. As a graduate researcher at Columbia University, I experienced teachers' reluctance to complete surveys designed to illuminate their practices and feelings about curriculum implementation.

I heard statements like, "Would this be used to grade me and assess my performance?" and "Would I lose my job as a result of this?" I needed to assuage their fears, making it clear to teachers that the survey was to support

administrators in designing aligned professional learning to improve curriculum implementation, not to assess teacher effectiveness. Even so, I could see how teachers' concerns might lead to response bias if they felt the need to only present a positive picture of the work.

TURNING DATA INTO ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Accurate and actionable student data is required to tailor learning experiences to target students' needs and improve teachers' practice. In *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*, Bryk et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of measurement in advancing quality and reliability at scale: "We cannot improve at scale what we can't measure." Yet measurement is just one side of the equation because data and measurement are only as good as the questions they help to answer.

Even though data can be ubiquitous or overwhelming, the goal is to turn it into actionable insights. One high school English language arts teacher in a RAND survey of teachers' perception of instructional coherence noted that "nobody is telling us how to look at the data or why this data is valuable. Are we looking at those assessments and actually seeing what kids need to do well on those assessments? No, it's more like, let's just keep testing everybody and hopefully the data is going to look good" (Pauketat et al., 2023).

This teacher's perception was that data did not serve to inform instructional improvement. Instead, its purpose was to demonstrate school performance.

Data will improve education only if it leads to insightful actions. It is also important to provide guidance and training for school leaders to

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incorporate data analysis into their school culture. Simply having data doesn't imply that it would be used or that things would get better automatically.

For teachers, each data cycle should act as a learning loop that inspires new processes for working in pursuit of better outcomes. This continuous cycle of disciplined inquiry combines the interplay of theory, measurement, and practical insights as used in scientific fields. Data should have practical implications for day-to-day teaching life.

Administrators should make sure that data acts as a driver for equity and improvement. Questions that should guide the work include: What does this help me do? What questions would I be able to answer as a result of this? Will the data help me answer what is working and what isn't, under what conditions, and for whom? Otherwise, we risk collecting data for data's sake.

STEPS TO AN INSIGHT-DRIVEN CULTURE

To improve learning for all students, Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning stress setting expectations and building capacity for the use of data and evidence to plan educator learning and foster a culture of collaborative inquiry that continuously seeks improvement (Learning Forward, 2022). The following six strategies can help educators create an insight-driven culture that enables improvement for better outcomes.

1. Reorient mindsets and beliefs.

In education, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the complex issues we face. What works in one context may not be effective in another, and the process of achieving success requires tacit evidence, insights, and data, all powered by a willingness to learn from experience and experimentation, which inevitably includes some failures.

In systems that emphasize certain outcomes, the system operates toward reaching those outcomes. Using data

and insights to pivot, innovate, and strive for more equitable outcomes can seem onerous. Failure to meet outcomes can be disastrous. But helping teachers adopt a learning mindset in a culture that doesn't penalize failure can yield powerful learning and results.

With this mindset, data can be used for learning over accountability. Failures can be reframed as learning opportunities. Schools can continually examine their already existing best practices, discarding those lacking in evidence collected by and for the school.

This fosters a high trust culture of psychological safety. Teachers can then learn from the data on what is or isn't working instead of attempting to replicate a new educational philosophy or someone else's vision of what good teaching looks like.

In addition, the mindset that gathering data is for punitive purposes, which I experienced when collecting data, needs to be expunged by clearly and consistently communicating the expectations for its collection, usage, and dissemination. This would reduce the tendency for bias and resistance to data collection.

2. Include everyone.

Data collection, creation, and usage should not be limited to those who have an extensive data background. After all, data shows the extent to which the work is producing results and for whom. As such, data should be integrated into the standard work of everyone by building collective activity for everyone to create, access, and use data — not just data nerds.

For example, every teacher may be required to have a data responsibility such as implementing strong and consistent data entry procedures or requiring them to flag problems and opportunities for improvement when there is a deviation in the data from performance expectations.

In addition, teachers need to have the authority and opportunity to interrogate and interpret data based on their contextual and historical

knowledge — for example, in small discussion groups. This process recognizes teachers as experts, leveraging their insights and ideas for improvement.

Teachers frequently find themselves in bureaucratic environments where top-down mandates leave little or no room for their feedback or opportunities to deviate. Yet the complex and diverse nature of the educational system necessitates contextual approaches and teacher leadership.

Specialized data analytics staff may take on more complex data functions such as creating systemwide processes for measuring and understanding statistical properties and connections between data.

3. Increase data collection ease and frequency.

In car manufacturing in Japan, workers have the authority to stop production lines by pulling on a thin nylon rope that hangs on hooks along the assembly line if they see a potential problem. Schools need to have this, too. By embedding practical measurements in the existing work of teachers and students, trouble spots can be detected immediately, incentivizing teachers to be reflexive and report concerns so issues can have a prompt, collaborative response.

Everyone should be expected to look constantly for ways to improve the school system by valuing this kind of productivity and adopting a learning attitude. Teachers can flag the process that is not working and brainstorm improvements to problems as they occur.

With this type of quick data collection, teachers can spot and repair gaps in knowledge. For example, school leadership teams can set benchmarks that trigger immediate reporting and troubleshooting once the data reveals a range below a certain threshold for a particular process or outcome of interest within a reporting period — for example, teachers need to alert

instructional coaches when over 50% of students are struggling to grasp a concept.

Equity data that is actionable and connects with teaching activities should also be collected — for example, when a student on the free and reduced lunch program is absent for more than two days in a row.

4. Hold sensemaking and collective learning meetings.

Education systems must make space to talk about data from academics, professional learning, and teaching on a regular basis. Through these meetings, cross-functional teams of teachers, administrators, support staff, and students coalesce to interrogate, synthesize, and create meaning from the data. The group leverages its experience to extract insights across functions, identify bright spots, and raise concerns where data is not showing the desired results.

Within this step, there are four ways to go about this work. First is to observe and make sense of the data. Educators choose a piece of data, disaggregate by subgroups (if applicable), and consider the deeper meaning behind the data by answering questions regarding the past, present, and future of this data point.

Second, create themes with it. Select another piece of related data (if applicable), compare the two, draw connections, look for patterns, and organize it according to themes to capture anything interesting or meaningful through comparison.

Third, extract insights and intelligence. Review the themes to identify the essence of what it is about to uncover the key takeaways by asking why, how, and so what.

Fourth, create an action plan. These insights can then be conceptualized into an actionable set of strategies for experimentation and decision-making.

5. Leverage existing expertise and technology.

Technology opens up opportunities to collect data and interpret it for

improvement. Digital learning tools can now create simple reporting dashboards that support teachers in identifying students who are struggling and provide suggestions for small-group instruction.

Technology tools can also aggregate and compare data from core and supplemental curriculum and interventions while offering immediate cues and long-term suggestions to teachers that validate what they experience in the classroom. Schools can also identify data and technology teacher champions to create user-friendly and dynamic reports after data has been collected and interpreted.

6. Spread ideas for scale.

Good practice often sits in silos with teachers working in their own bubbles. School systems must be conscious of how their knowledge management systems work in both collecting and disseminating insights and good practice. Once data collection yields insights from sensemaking, school leaders should set systems and routines to share successful practices gained from data by highlighting positive achievement bright spots. This should include knowledge sharing of successes and learnings.

Existing systems, like professional learning communities, professional learning sessions, and teacher observation programs, can serve as platforms for knowledge dissemination. The key is to ensure that valuable insights are conserved and actively codified, then shared and applied to ensure equitable outcomes across the board.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The potential for data to transform the education sector is immense yet largely untapped. By shifting the focus from data as a tool for accountability to one for enhancing learning and teaching practices, we can cultivate a more supportive and effective educational environment.

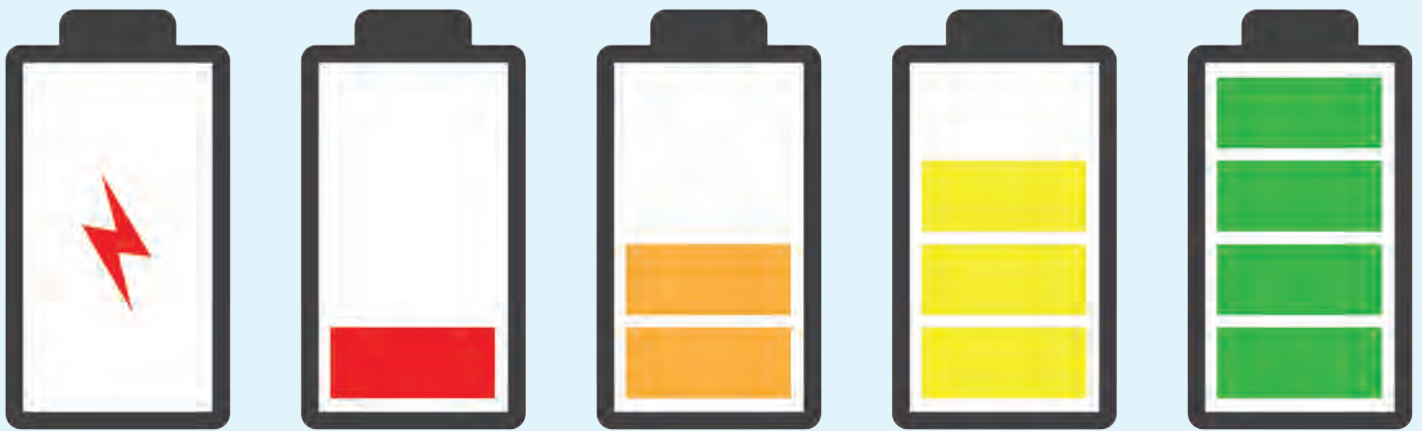
This shift requires a change in mindset from all stakeholders in education — administrators, teachers, and policymakers — who must recognize the value of data not as a punitive measure but as a cornerstone of continuous improvement.

Embracing a data-driven culture in education doesn't simply mean collecting more data, but rather improving the quality of the data collected, the access to it, and the ways it is used. This means prioritizing data that offers actionable insights and supports pedagogical refinement. Schools that adopt this approach can nurture a dynamic learning environment where teachers are empowered and students' diverse needs are met more effectively.

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RECHARGE your district initiatives



with these 10 STRATEGIES

BY WADE WATSON

How do you sustain K-12 district initiatives? It is challenging to maintain their support over time. Teaching and learning initiatives, despite being well-intentioned, often struggle to gain traction due to limited teacher acceptance or inconsistent program fidelity, so much so that many of us are familiar with the concept of “initiative decay.” Even the most promising initiatives can deteriorate due to staff turnover, leadership

transitions, the introduction of new programs, and a gradual decline in enthusiasm.

In 2021, this was the situation we found ourselves in at Maricopa Unified School District in Arizona. As the director of curriculum and instruction, I am part of the team that selects district initiatives and curricula and am responsible for making sure teachers have the professional learning they need to carry out these initiatives.

As students returned to full-time in-person learning after the pandemic

closures, we knew we could not pick up where we left off. Teachers were overwhelmed by the number of initiatives in the district and unsure how to fit everything into the school day.

We recognized an ideal opportunity to rethink, revamp, and revitalize our key initiatives. We narrowed our focus and became more intentional about implementation, keeping the needs of our students and teachers at the forefront.

One initiative we kept was

Thinking Maps, a set of visual tools used across subject areas to support students' comprehension, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. With a refreshed emphasis on Thinking Maps, we aimed to extend its implementation and include a stronger emphasis on writing by implementing one of its advanced programs. Writing was a priority for us because it is tied so closely to comprehension across all content areas. We knew that students needed to be able to write to be successful in any school setting.

We also recommitted to Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures, a program that supports cooperative and student-directed learning. We selected this program as a core initiative because shifting ownership of learning to students enhances engagement, reduces behavioral issues, and improves comprehension.

We had seen good results in schools where Thinking Maps was implemented well, with higher program fidelity correlated with improved comprehension and writing skills. However, a combination of staff turnover and lack of leadership focus resulted in a loss of momentum. Originally introduced several years before, an analysis of its application revealed varied levels of professional learning quality and program fidelity throughout the district.

Throughout this process, we gained key insights that have bolstered our

success with initiative implementation. By applying the following 10 strategies, we successfully restored fidelity to Thinking Maps, Kagan Cooperative Learning, and a few other core initiatives and paved the way for a successful rollout of the writing program.

As a result, our teachers are not only more confident and enthusiastic about using the tools, they are seeing tangible results with students. Just one year after implementing the writing program, we are seeing significant improvement in our district benchmarks, with 36% of students increasing at least one proficiency level in writing and 22% of students increasing at least one proficiency level in math and English language arts. The lessons we learned are broadly applicable to change efforts with professional learning at the core.



1. Understand the “why” behind initiatives.

Before initiating or revisiting a district initiative, it is important to establish a collective commitment, particularly among the classroom teachers who will be implementing it. Starting with the “why” — clarifying the reasons the initiative was chosen

and how it is expected to benefit students and teachers — is critical to getting buy-in from teachers and school leaders.

For Thinking Maps and Kagan, I make sure professional learning starts with an overview of the brain research supporting these methods and a clear explanation of how the strategies complement student learning. When teachers understand how the new strategies will help their students, they are more excited to try them in the classroom.



2. Limit the number of initiatives.

Initiative overload is often a critical factor in the failure of initiatives. When new initiatives are piled on top of old ones, it leads to one of two outcomes: Older strategies and programs are discarded and replaced by something new, or teachers neglect to adopt the new initiatives, anticipating they will soon be replaced.

This often results in confusion among teachers regarding their roles and how different strategies and programs are intended to integrate. After the pandemic, our goal was to pare down the number of core initiatives across the district. Feedback from teacher surveys as well as direct

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observation in the classroom affirmed that this was the direction we needed to take.

The Thinking Maps and Kagan initiatives encompassed foundational strategies that would support teaching and learning throughout all grade levels and subject areas. By narrowing our focus, we can devote focused attention to each initiative, thereby increasing teacher engagement and overall success.



3. Set clear goals.

Once initiatives are chosen, it's important to set clear, measurable goals. What goals are we setting for our teachers and students? How will the initiatives help to achieve these goals?

In Maricopa, raising writing scores was one of our primary objectives. We also wanted to give teachers practical classroom strategies to increase reading comprehension and critical thinking. As a former instructional coach, I wanted to give our teachers tools that would help them better meet the diverse learning needs of our students.

For each initiative, it was important to define clear expectations for implementation: where and how they would be applied, their intended purposes, and the outcomes we expected.



4. Get leaders on board.

Principals and school leaders set the expectations and tone for teachers in their schools and are integral in modeling and reinforcing the adoption of districtwide initiatives. For a sustainable implementation, it is important that all district instructional leaders, including the superintendent,

support and fully understand the initiative.

After the pandemic, program evaluations highlighted the crucial role leadership plays in sustaining any initiative. At that time, teachers were requesting additional support from leaders in implementing core initiatives. To do this, we needed our principals to be involved in the same professional learning opportunities that teachers engaged in so that they could provide an additional layer of coaching and be able to properly recognize, evaluate, and reinforce the strategies during classroom walk-throughs.

As part of our Thinking Maps reboot, we engaged school and district leaders in leadership professional learning. This included an explanation of the strategies, the brain research behind them, and how they would be implemented.

The leaders were also given rubrics to help them evaluate the implementation in walk-throughs and ways that they could use Thinking Maps in their leadership roles. Our superintendent participated in the sessions, asked great questions, and emphasized the importance of this program.

This hands-on involvement by district and school leaders not only aids in maintaining the integrity and fidelity of the initiative but also helps them to support teachers throughout and following the implementation process. Getting leadership on board transforms an initiative from a directive into a shared priority. School and district leaders now regularly use Thinking Maps in their own jobs to support communication, collaboration, and consensus building among staff.



5. Strengthen professional learning.

When planning the reboot, we evaluated teachers' professional

learning needs. Although some teachers still used Thinking Maps, we found that implementation was uneven. Some of the professional learning facilitators from the original rollout were still on staff, but it became clear that most of them were not up to date on the latest methodologies.

Together with other district leaders, I assessed professional learning sessions to evaluate their consistency and effectiveness. We discovered significant variations in how learning providers — academic coaches, members of the academic services department, and teacher leaders — communicated the core purposes or the “why” and the neuroscience behind the strategies.

As a result, all professional learning facilitators engaged in a comprehensive relearning program. We created a new, standardized professional learning protocol to implement across all schools. We also identified and developed new teacher leaders, ensuring that each school had at least two up-to-date professional learning facilitators on-site.

District instructional coaches also participated in the new relearning program. Moving forward, these providers will conduct formal professional learning for new staff and lead an annual multiweek rollout process at each school designed to reinforce the strategies for teachers and students. Similarly, for our writing program, these facilitators conducted all teacher professional learning, ensuring a districtwide uniformity in delivery and approach.



6. Build in ongoing coaching and mentoring.

Ongoing coaching and mentoring are necessary to sustain any long-term initiative. Research has been clear that “one-and-done” programs do

not lead to sustained, transformative change. That's why Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) stress the importance of sustained models of professional learning tailored to specific teacher needs and contexts.

At Maricopa, the professional learning model ensures that all teachers have access to a certified professional learning facilitator at their school for questions and support as they apply the strategies they have learned in their classrooms.

Teacher leaders and instructional coaches provide modeling and lead collaboration sessions where teachers share ideas and ask questions. Coaches and other members of the academic services department conduct regular classroom walk-throughs, with an emphasis on first-year teachers and those who seem to be struggling with the strategies.

During these walk-throughs, they provide feedback and assistance and can even conduct model lessons. The district also offers ongoing professional learning to refresh knowledge and deepen learning.

A key lesson I've learned is that I can't be the primary instructional leader for all 11 schools in our district. It is important to have teacher leaders and school administration at each site to offer ongoing coaching, feedback, and modeling and provide targeted assistance to teachers at each school.

I rely heavily on our instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and school leaders to provide day-to-day support. Adding this layer of leadership support, which was lacking previously, has helped to dramatically increase teacher acceptance and program fidelity.



7. Use observations and walk-throughs to assess progress.

I'm a big believer in walk-throughs

and classroom observation as a strategy for sustainable transformation. Walk-throughs allow principals, coaches, and other instructional leaders to gauge how teachers are feeling about the initiative and look for observational evidence of the implementation.

For our chosen initiatives, we see evidence in the form of student-created learning materials posted on walls and in hallways, students successfully applying the strategies for learning in the classroom, and teachers integrating the strategies into their daily lesson plans.

The rubrics from the leadership professional learning provide clear, measurable things to look for at the student, teacher, and whole-school level. This allows us to see where each teacher and school is on the implementation continuum. Based on this observation data, we can determine where additional professional learning and coaching are needed and how to better support our teachers.



8. Address areas of resistance.

Every implementation will encounter areas of resistance. Some teachers will embrace new ideas and strategies more easily than others. Our first strategy was to shore up the most enthusiastic supporters. Seeing other teachers have success with new strategies will inspire their peers.

While consistency and fidelity are important in any schoolwide initiative, it is important to build in flexibility, allowing teachers to find what works best in their individual classrooms. However, it is also important to listen to teachers who are having trouble applying the strategies within their context and provide targeted support that addresses their concerns.

During the initial rollout of Thinking Maps, we noticed some resistance, particularly among our

secondary math teachers, who found it challenging to adapt the strategies to their specific teaching contexts. To solve this problem, I asked one of the math instructional coaches to develop targeted professional learning specifically on how to use the strategies with math and how they align with the essential standards the math teachers must address.

It's also important to look for areas of success and share those with other teachers. For example, we have a precalculus teacher who embraced the strategies in her classroom and whose students were experiencing success. This inspired others, which led to a curiosity about what she was doing that worked. Teachers need to see examples of how it is working for others in their discipline.



9. Be prepared to pivot and adjust.

Even when things are going well, you have to be prepared to pivot and adjust. You may see shifts in mandates, standards, the addition of curriculum, and evolving testing requirements. The needs of students may also change over time as demographics shift, or the impacts of other programs and initiatives might create a need to change course.

Instructional leaders must stay flexible and respond to the developing needs of students and teachers. Regular walk-throughs and review of district data will help leaders identify when a change is needed.



10. Celebrate successes.

Success breeds success. To sustain any district initiative, you must recognize and celebrate those who are doing it well. Recognizing the high-

IDEAS

quality work of individual teachers and exemplary whole-school examples and communicates the examples you want others to follow.

I keep track of feedback I receive on our initiatives and actively look for positive examples to acknowledge on our walk-throughs. In front of my desk, I have a bulletin board where I post positive feedback and examples to remind me why we are doing what we are doing. It also gives me a ready source of great ideas to share with others.

Moreover, we celebrate quantitative data. For example, a Response to Intervention math teacher observed an 18% increase in proficiency in a unit she was teaching

after implementing the strategies. In writing, we saw a districtwide marked improvement between the fall and winter benchmark assessments after implementing the new writing program.

We celebrate accomplishments like these in governing board meetings during the superintendent's report and in school spotlight presentations to the board, in which student presenters share examples of district initiatives with governing board members.

By employing these 10 strategies, we have not only revitalized our commitment to key programs and strategies but also created a robust framework for sustaining districtwide education initiatives. Focusing on a

select group of core initiatives and nurturing them through these practices allows us to maximize impact for both students and teachers. Collaborative, ongoing, job-embedded educator learning, along with buy-in at the leadership level, has been instrumental to our success.

REFERENCE

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

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DISCUSS. COLLABORATE. FACILITATE.

TOOLS

SHARPEN YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOCUS

Although it may sound straightforward, curriculum-based professional learning is about more than simply examining instructional materials. It's about taking a deep dive into the content and pedagogical strategies to develop expertise and practice implementation. Use the tools on the following pages to find out whether you are engaging in curriculum-based professional learning and how to hone your approach.

Is your professional learning curriculum-based?



BY LEARNING FORWARD

Curriculum-based professional learning focuses on the implementation of high-quality instructional materials in ongoing and meaningful ways that lead to improvements in teachers' instruction and students' learning. Although it may sound straightforward, curriculum-based professional learning is about more than simply studying the materials. It is not uncommon for educators to confuse curriculum-based professional learning with more simplistic orientations to curriculum or with other forms of high-quality professional learning.

Curriculum-based professional learning includes educators experiencing the curriculum in the role of students, examining both the content and pedagogy necessary for effective instruction, and deepening their facility with the curriculum over time. It is grounded in high-quality educative curriculum materials, which have not only rigorous content for students but information for teachers that builds their own knowledge and implementation of the content.

Curriculum-based professional learning does:

- Focus on the integrity of implementation of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials that are highly rated by independent assessors (e.g., EdReports) and include educative components that build educators' knowledge of content and pedagogy.
- Engage educators in the same kind of inquiry-based learning they are expected to provide for their students — for example, by working through

curriculum lessons and engaging in continuous improvement cycles to examine their strategies and test improvement ideas.

- Use active and collaborative learning experiences that encourage teachers to challenge their beliefs, improve their instructional practices, and expand their content knowledge — for example, through PLCs, grade- or school-level teams, coaching, and improvement cycles.
- Align with the principles of high-quality professional learning outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning.

Curriculum-based professional learning does not:

- Consist solely of sessions focused on orientation to the curriculum or instructional materials.
- Focus on content outside of the curriculum and instructional materials or on building teachers' content knowledge in ways disconnected from the curriculum.
- Rely on siloed or disconnected learning sessions with no progression of skills and lessons over time.
- Use curricula that have not been vetted for quality and effectiveness.

The tools on the following pages are designed to help you understand the difference between curriculum-based professional learning and other approaches, determine whether you are currently engaging in curriculum-based professional learning, and consider next steps for standards-aligned implementation.

ARE YOU ENGAGING IN CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING?

Instructions: Consider the characteristics of curriculum-based professional learning in the left column and mark whether your professional learning addresses that characteristic. Then note how you are addressing it and how you could begin or improve your efforts to do so.

Characteristic of curriculum-based professional learning	Does your professional learning do this? (Yes/ no)	What are some examples of how you do this (if applicable)?	How could you improve this aspect of professional learning?
Focuses on implementing high-quality curriculum and instructional materials.			
Includes active, inquiry-based learning experiences grounded in the curriculum.			
Is ongoing and builds over time (not one-and-done).			
Helps educators challenge beliefs, change instructional practices, and expand content knowledge.			
Supports educators to reflect on and apply their learning in the classroom.			

Questions to consider and discuss

- Describe aspects of curriculum-based professional learning in which you are currently engaged and how you can build on them.
- What aspects of curriculum-based professional learning are you missing, and which will you address first?
- What additional information or resources do you need to strengthen your curriculum-based professional learning?

TOOLS

MAKE THE SHIFT TO CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Instructions: The following table describes shifts in design and structure that are necessary to move from traditional professional development to high-quality curriculum-based professional learning. For each aspect, begin by considering where you are in making this shift. Then determine where to focus your efforts by ranking each aspect as a low, medium, or high priority and circle those that are currently a high priority.

Less emphasis on	More emphasis on	Current practice On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time), where are you today on this shift?	Future goal How much of a priority is this shift for you right now? (low, medium, high)
One-size fits all approach for learning about instructional materials.	Different learning designs that support educators at different stages of learning about the materials.		
Top-down approach that aims to passively impart instructional strategies to educators.	Collaborative learning in which educators co-construct meaning and understanding of the curriculum.		
Feedback and reflective practices used solely during monitoring and assessment.	Feedback and reflective practices embedded in every phase of educator learning.		
Change as a one-time event.	Change as a process that occurs over time.		
Learning about instructional materials limited to curriculum orientation or summer sessions.	Learning with instructional materials occurs all year.		
Collaborative groups organized by choice.	Collaborative groups organized by grade levels and subjects using the curriculum.		
Prioritizing multiple goals during professional learning community (PLC) time.	Protecting professional learning community (PLC) time to focus on instructional materials.		
Focusing all professional learning on early-stage implementation of instructional materials.	Engaging in professional learning that addresses early use, ongoing support, and capacity building for implementing instructional materials.		

Source: Adapted from *Transforming Teaching: The Elements, Professional Learning Series* by Stephanie Hirsh. www.curriculumpd.org/learning-materials

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND INSTRUCTION STANDARD?

Instructions: The Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning can help educators shape curriculum-based professional learning and build high-quality instructional practices. The standard states: **Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators prioritize high-quality curriculum and instructional materials for students, assess student learning, and understand curriculum and implement through instruction** (Learning Forward, 2022).

Circle or highlight your role in the following table to review how you can support the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard in your school or system’s professional learning. Then answer the reflection questions below the table.

For more information about how to move from initial to ideal implementation on each construct of this standard and learn how to implement this standard in concert with the other 10 standards, go to standards.learningforward.org/ic-map-tool/

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction			
The table below illustrates how leaders at different levels contribute to achieving the desired outcomes for this standard.			
System/Central Office	Principal	Coach	External Partner
Construct 1: Prioritize high-quality curriculum and instructional materials.			
Builds own and others’ capacity to develop and implement policy and guidelines on high-quality curriculum to promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.	Builds own and staff’s capacity to develop and implement school-based guidelines on high-quality curriculum, aligned with system policy, to promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.	Builds own and colleagues’ capacity to implement school-based guidelines on high-quality curriculum, aligned with system policy, to promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.	Builds own and clients’ capacity to develop and implement policy and guidelines on high-quality curriculum to promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.
Builds own and others’ capacity to select high-quality curriculum and instructional materials using established criteria.	Builds school leaders’, staff’s, and community members’ capacity to contribute to the selection of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials using established criteria.	Contributes, by building the capacity of colleagues , to the selection of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials, using established criteria.	Builds own and clients’ capacity to select high-quality curriculum and instructional materials using established criteria.
Construct 2: Assess student learning to advance progress.			
Builds own and others’ capacity to understand a range of student assessment purposes and approaches and to determine their alignment to high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and all instructional staff’s understanding of student assessment purposes, approaches, and their alignment to high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and colleagues’ understanding of student assessment purposes, approaches, and their alignment to high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and clients’ capacity to understand a range of student assessment purposes and approaches and to determine their alignment to high-quality curriculum.
Builds own and others’ capacity to use student assessment data to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction.	Builds own and staff’s capacity to use student formative and summative assessment data to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction.	Builds own and colleagues’ capacity to use student formative and summative assessment data to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction.	Builds own and clients’ capacity to use student formative and summative assessment data to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction.

Continued on p. 68

TOOLS

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction, <i>continued</i>			
System/Central Office	Principal	Coach	External Partner
Construct 3: Understand curriculum and implement through instruction.			
Builds own and others' capacity to understand and implement high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and staff's capacity to understand and implement high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and colleagues' capacity to understand and implement high-quality curriculum.	Builds own and clients' capacity to understand and implement high-quality curriculum.
Builds own and others' capacity to adapt instruction and use of instructional materials based on knowledge of students.	Builds own and staff's capacity to adapt instruction and use of instructional materials based on knowledge of students.	Builds own and colleagues' capacity to adapt instruction and use of instructional materials based on knowledge of students.	Builds own and clients' capacity to adapt instruction and use of instructional materials based on knowledge of students.
Facilitates the use of technology to support systemwide implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Facilitates the use of technology to support school-level implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Facilitates the use of technology to support implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Facilitates the use of technology to support implementation of high-quality curriculum.
Monitors and measures the impact of systemwide curriculum-based professional learning on the implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Monitors and measures the impact of school-level curriculum-based professional learning on the implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Contributes to monitoring and measuring the impact of curriculum-based professional learning on the implementation of high-quality curriculum.	Contributes to monitoring and measuring the impact of curriculum-based professional learning on the implementation of high-quality curriculum.

Reflection questions

- What are you doing well to address the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard?
- What areas and steps do you need to focus on more?
- What resources will you use to improve your implementation?

REFERENCE

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



More resources about the Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard are available at **standards.learningforward.org**. They include:

- Full text of the standard
- Standards Vignette: Achieving the Benefits of New Curriculum
- Advancing Outcomes tool that highlights challenges caused by omitting the standard
- Role-specific Innovation Configuration maps

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UPDATES

10 top professional learning topics in 2024

01 Leadership/continued leadership development

02 Models of professional development

03 Continuous improvement cycles

04 Facilitation

05 Comprehensive system improvement/reform

06 Equity

07 Implementation

08 Coaching

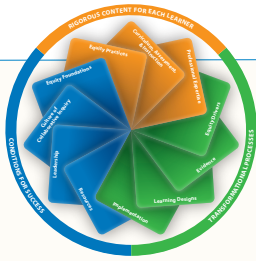
09 Educator effectiveness

10 Curriculum-based professional learning

To give you a peek at what's trending for Learning Forward's 2024 Annual Conference, here are the top 10 session topics most popular with attendees based on their session choices.

The conference, to be held Dec. 8-11 in Denver, Colorado, is the largest gathering of educators focused solely on professional learning as a lever for school improvement and student success. Offering 271 sessions covering 80 topics over four days, the event is designed to meet the needs of educators in roles responsible for ensuring excellent, effective teaching and learning in their schools and systems.

UPDATES



Maryland adopts the Standards for Professional Learning

In a move aimed at lifting student achievement, the Maryland State Board of Education voted unanimously to adopt Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning. The vote signals a strong commitment to elevating students’ academic success by ensuring high-quality teaching practices in the state’s 24 school districts.

Superintendent Carey M. Wright hailed the standards as the “gold standard in the field” of professional learning. In a memo to board members, Wright emphasized the need for a research-based framework to guide professional learning in Maryland, noting that these standards would play a crucial role in enhancing teacher instruction and, ultimately, student outcomes.

The decision followed a presentation by Deann Collins, deputy superintendent, and Elise Brown, executive director of professional learning and high-quality instructional materials. Brown pointed to research that found consistent evidence that program alignment with the Standards for Professional Learning is associated with improved teacher instruction and student achievement outcomes.

“We know that professional learning is a lever for teachers and students to improve, but not all professional learning is created equally,” Brown told state education board members. “It is really important for us to signal as an agency the value of high-quality professional learning that is grounded in standards. When we see that happening, what we’re also going to see is growth in teacher practice and their knowledge, which in turn will impact student outcomes.”

MEMBERS CHAT WITH AUTHOR OF *THE EQUITY EXPRESSION*

Learning Forward comprehensive members met with author Feneshia Hubbard in September to discuss her book, *The Equity Expression: Six Entry Points for Nonnegotiable Academic Success*.

Hubbard outlined the six equity entry points in the book: mindset, relationships, products, spaces, processes, and systems. She pointed to the importance of relationships and self-reflection, noting that the relationship we have with ourselves impacts how we connect with our students, colleagues, and families.

Filled with tools, *The Equity Expression* is a guide to engaging in equity work in education settings and will “challenge you to reimagine discourse on equity at the confluence of high-quality instructional content and an excellent and equitable education,” Hubbard says in the book.

In the Learning Forward Book Club discussion, Hubbard used a bingo game to lead participants to some of the book’s key points and gave an overview along with specific tools for doing equity work. In one example, Hubbard suggested forming specific types of trusted partnerships with colleagues for reflection, sensemaking,



Visual created by attendee Annette de Graaf.

and support while putting equity into action.

The Book Club is a benefit for Learning Forward members at the comprehensive level who receive four books each year selected by Learning Forward and our partner, Corwin Press. To become a comprehensive member, visit: learningforward.org/membership/

Frederick Brown elected chair of Learning First Alliance

Frederick Brown, Learning Forward CEO, was elected chair of the Learning First Alliance, a group of associations working to advance trust, investment, and equity in public education for all learners.

Brown brings extensive experience and commitment to improving student outcomes by advancing high-quality professional learning and is a champion of supporting teachers' and leaders' continuous learning.

"It is an honor to serve as chair of the Learning First Alliance," Brown said. "In this pivotal time for public education, our collective efforts to support and elevate the teaching profession are more important than ever. I look forward to working with our member organizations to drive meaningful change."

The Learning First Alliance represents many national education associations that serve principals, superintendents, school counselors, professional learning leaders, and others.

CELEBRATE ACADEMY GRADUATES AND BE INSPIRED BY THEIR WORK

If you are attending Learning Forward's Annual Conference Dec. 8-11 in Denver, Colorado, we invite you to join us at an event celebrating the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2024.

These educators from a wide variety of contexts and systems will graduate from the 2½ -year learning experience at 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 8.

Open to all conference attendees, the one-hour event is much more than a celebration of achievement for the participants. It is also a chance for attendees to learn about the ways these educators have worked to improve their schools, districts, and systems so students can thrive.

During their learning experience, academy members study research-based strategies that lead them toward solutions to their problems of practice. The Learning Forward Academy provides an array of tools to do this work, including root cause analysis, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, and a logic model.

At the graduation, academy members will display posters offering a snapshot of their work and ways they are transforming learning for students.

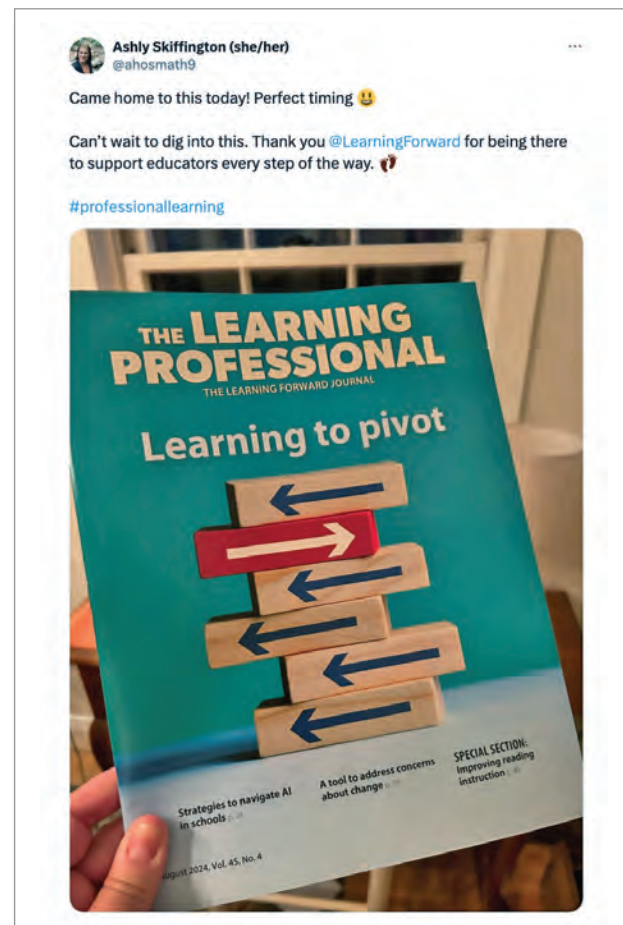
Following the graduation, all conference attendees are invited to attend the Welcome Reception at 6 p.m.



We invite all schools to change your #PLsign to educate your communities on the value of educator professional learning.

When educators learn, students succeed. The next time students are out of school for a professional learning day, change your #PLsign! Use the hashtag and tag @learningforward on social media.

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THROUGH THE LENS

OF LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The 11 Standards for Professional Learning describe the content, processes, and conditions of high-quality learning that make a difference for students and educators. Reflection questions based on this issue's articles can help you deepen your understanding of the standards and improve your professional learning.



Professional Expertise: Today's high-quality curricula are focused on inquiry and making meaning from real-world experiences. Since many teachers didn't learn this way, they need opportunities to dive into curriculum and become experts at applying it.

Article: "Curriculum-based professional learning benefits students and teachers," p. 26

Your reflections:

Consider: Have you experienced a curriculum adoption that didn't achieve its potential because the professional learning to properly implement it wasn't in place? What could you do differently to build educators' content and pedagogical expertise to improve implementation?



Leadership: Strong leadership is helping a California district establish a vision of high-quality teaching through professional learning for a full year before applying a new curriculum.

Article: "Professional learning lays the foundation for new curriculum," p. 44

Your reflections:

Consider: What role do your system leaders play in creating a vision for successful, inclusive changes in curriculum and professional learning? How can you use your expertise and responsibilities to help develop or support such a vision?



Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction: Newcomer multilingual students do not need to achieve English proficiency to engage with grade-level content. Professional learning can help educators apply the curriculum in rigorous but accessible ways.

Article: "Putting multilingual students at the center of curriculum-based learning," p. 38

Your reflections:

Consider: How does your professional learning support teachers to work with newcomer multilingual learners at a grade-level appropriate level of rigor? What additional support do you need and where can you access it?

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

AT A GLANCE

WORDS OF WISDOM ON CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

"If leaders don't understand the important role high-quality curricula and instructional materials play in professional learning and student success, they are unlikely to create the conditions in their districts or schools to support it."

– Brown, p. 8

"The typical professional learning approach for curriculum adoption — one to two days of training from the curriculum company — is insufficient for ensuring educators understand the curriculum structures and how to use them. Successful districts and schools are continually engaged in a process of inquiring into teaching and learning." – Guarino et al., p. 44

"When teachers are immersed in a lesson and experience it as a student, it doesn't seem difficult –

in fact, it seems fun!"

–Talbert,
p. 10

"When educators are the ones driving the changes, implementing the curriculum with integrity doesn't require additional time."

– Foster, p. 26

"When implementing a new curriculum, it is natural to think first about the needs of teachers on the front line of instruction. However, to effectively support them, we must focus on leaders as well." – Farag, p. 14

"Creating space for teachers to voice concerns and grapple with these new instructional elements is essential for the ultimate desired teacher outcomes in their vision and instructional practice."

– McNeill & Affolter, p. 32



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2024 Learning Forward Annual Conference



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