Building bridges

District-university partnerships support new teachers p. 28

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I SAY

Kendall Zoller

Author, global consultant, educator, and researcher
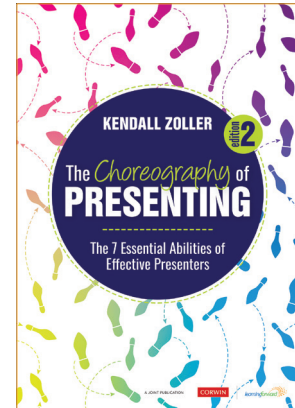
"Helping groups shift perspective and emotion is a gift of effective presenters. The suggestion is that when you are in these situations, you choose a mindset that puts you in the most flexible and conscious state. I have learned from my mentors to choose joy, love, and curiosity as examples, knowing these will get me through the situation in a way that supports the group."

— Source: **Zoller, K. (2024).** *The choreography of presenting: The 7 essential abilities of effective presenters*, (2nd ed., pp. 112-113). Corwin.

The Choreography of Presenting is Learning Forward's current Book Club selection. To learn more about the Learning Forward Book Club, visit **learningforward.org/bookclub/**

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learning**forward**
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

BUILD BRIDGES WITH STUDENT SUCCESS IN MIND

Students need the adults in their communities to come together for the common goal of supporting their current and future success.

As we head into 2025, building bridges is a timely theme for Learning Forward. Not only are we bridging the work we've been doing this past year with the future to ensure sustained access to high-quality professional learning, but we're reflecting on the many bridges we all need to build to create a peaceful, productive, and positive world for young people.

In the context of historic political division, high rates of academic, social, and emotional stress among students, and uncertainties about the future, students need the adults in their communities to come together for the common goal of supporting their current and future success. If ensuring every student's success were a simple task, we would have accomplished it by now. We haven't, and it's clear that no one person or institution can do this work alone. It will take schools, community institutions, higher education, families, policymakers, and others working together to put all the planks in place.

In this issue of *The Learning Professional*, we home in on building bridges between K-12 schools and other institutions, especially higher education, to create a career-long continuum of professional learning and educator excellence. Just as students benefit from partnerships among all the contexts where they live and learn, educators benefit when preservice programs and ongoing professional learning partner to reinforce key principles of teaching and learning.

As Frederick Brown describes in his professional learning wish list, educators should understand high-quality professional learning from their earliest days in the profession so they can seek it out, advocate for it, and embody its principles as they become leaders and role models. And leaders in training should come to see professional learning for themselves and others as a core part of their roles. That means university preparation programs and alternative certification programs should embrace and build a deep understanding of high-quality professional learning and the Standards for Professional Learning.

This issue's Focus section includes several examples of fruitful professional learning partnerships that provide lessons for educators in all settings. Katie Dewey Hill and Janice Bradley explain how multiple stakeholders at the district, state, and university levels in Utah have worked together to build capacity for and quality of instructional coaching, pulling the levers of standards, credentialing, coursework, and on-the-job support.

Debra Russell and colleagues describe how a paid residency model for new teachers that leverages both universities and districts is leading to a stronger, more diverse, more prepared, and more stable teacher workforce. Leaders at the National Center for School-University Partnerships and some of their members write about how collaboration allows them to conduct cycles of inquiry and find solutions for their most pressing problems. And leaders from Tennessee's State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) show how they are expanding their impact, bringing the lessons from their successful efforts helping districts improve reading instruction to preservice teacher education programs.

These stories and strategies resonate with us at Learning Forward because everything we do is grounded in a culture of collaborative inquiry. From our networks to our professional services in districts to our collaboration with authors, we are constantly building bridges with student success in mind. We will be highlighting the theme of bridges throughout 2025, including at our Annual Conference in Boston. If you have a story of bridging to tell, apply to present at our conference, submit an article for this journal, or reach out and share the lessons you've learned. We can get students from where they are today to where we want them to be tomorrow if we learn and lead together. ■

Suzanne Bouffard is editor-in-chief of *The Learning Professional*.

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VOICES

WHAT'S ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WISH LIST?

Learning Forward CEO Frederick Brown has created his professional learning wish list for 2025. First on the list: "I believe teachers deserve and need to have a clear sense of the content, processes, and conditions for effective professional learning so they will demand it once they begin their teaching careers," Brown writes.

"If preservice programs help teachers understand the power and potential of high-quality professional learning from their earliest days in the profession, they will seek it out, demand it from their leaders, and see low-quality sessions as a problem to be fixed, not as an example of the larger field of learning opportunities."

See the rest of his list on p. 8 and send your wish list to us at **jefna.cohen@learningforward.org**

HERE'S MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WISH LIST FOR 2025

This year, I'm making a different kind of wish list — a set of steps to build a career-long professional learning continuum.

Many of us make wish lists around the holidays, a collection of requests and hopes that we've saved up during the year to share with family and friends. This year, I'm making a different kind of wish list — a set of steps to build a career-long professional learning continuum that begins with partnerships between K-12 districts and educator preparation programs. The wishes on this list can be fulfilled at any time, and their benefits continue for years to come.

TEACH STANDARDS IN PRESERVICE PROGRAMS

First, I wish both teachers and leaders will graduate from preservice programs with a deep understanding of high-quality professional learning. It should come as no surprise that, for me, this means knowledge about the Standards for Professional Learning and opportunities to implement them.

I believe teachers deserve and need to have a clear sense of the content, processes, and conditions for effective professional learning so they will demand it once they begin their teaching careers. Too often, professional learning gets a bad reputation because of the unfortunate persistence of outdated, sit-and-get professional development that doesn't connect to teachers' needs and doesn't lead to student success.

If preservice programs help teachers understand the power and potential of high-quality professional learning from their earliest days in the profession, they will seek it out, demand it from their leaders, and see low-quality sessions as a problem to be fixed, not as an example of the larger field of learning opportunities.

I also believe that aspiring leaders should understand how important it is for them to create the conditions in their schools and districts to help teachers and other leaders experience the kind of professional learning that research shows will lead to improved educator practice and results for students. As they embark on new roles, they need to know that professional learning is part of those roles, not a siloed activity that stands alone in the professional development department or human resources office.

Their leadership training programs can emphasize the importance of modeling high-quality professional learning through their continued engagement in their own ongoing learning and development as well as prioritizing professional learning time and resources for their staff members.

IMPLEMENT STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Second, I wish university faculty and staff will consider implementing the Standards for Professional Learning themselves as well as teaching them to candidates. In both my undergraduate and graduate education, I experienced teaching that transformed my practice, first as a teacher and then as a principal. Unfortunately, I also experienced instruction so lacking in inspiration and application that it led me to wonder if there were any minimum standards in place for higher education teaching.

Imagine a university program where *all* instructors understand the importance of and embody the practices of high-quality instruction. Of course, excellent instructors can be found in nearly all higher education programs. But if *every* instructor created an outstanding learning experience

Frederick Brown is president and CEO of Learning Forward.

for future leaders, collaborated with colleagues to continually learn about and share best practices, and transparently discussed those processes with candidates, the ultimate impact on K-12 students would be enormous.

Although the Standards for Professional Learning were written with K-12 schools in mind, the underlying principles apply to all levels of education. I believe they could help create the culture of instructional excellence in higher education that every leader deserves.

ENGAGE IN RECIPROCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Third, I wish districts and schools will engage in reciprocal partnerships where all parties learn from each other. The Wallace Foundation launched an initiative in 2016 that is a good example of such partnerships. In the initiative, seven universities in seven states worked with districts and other key partners to strengthen leader preparation programs and align them with district needs.

RAND conducted a study of the five-year initiative and noted several key findings (Wang et al., 2022):

- When districts were involved in choosing candidates for the university programs and helping shape the learning experiences for those students, graduates were more likely to return to the partner district and be better prepared to serve the students in its schools.
- Districts also learned about best practices from effective preservice programs, which resulted in stronger professional learning for principals back in the districts.
- Many districts developed systems to track the learning and experiences of their principals, which they were able to use

to strengthen professional learning and help with principal placement and leadership transitions.

This kind of shared learning is possible even without dedicated funding and a major national initiative. It starts with conversations between institutions and taking the time to develop a shared vision and goals. The next steps, including structures and data collection processes, can be informed by the examples and lessons from the Wallace initiative.

BUILD IN SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Fourth, I wish states and other jurisdictions will support university preparation programs and hold them accountable for the learning experiences described above. Change is often helped along by a carrot-and-stick approach, where policies and authorizing agencies both incentivize and monitor the desired modifications of existing patterns.

In educator preparation, state agencies play key roles in accrediting programs and overseeing credentialing programs for candidates. By aligning expectations across the educator pipeline and incentivizing collaboration between universities, alternative certification programs, and districts, states can build a system that embeds ongoing professional learning from the beginning and throughout educators' careers.

When I was a program officer at The Wallace Foundation, a state whose grant I managed was serious about holding leadership preparation programs accountable. After developing clear expectations about what was expected in those programs, the state decided to sunset all programs as part of the accreditation process. Every program had to reapply for accreditation and show evidence they

were meeting the new standards (The Wallace Foundation, 2008).

This may sound like a drastic approach, but it is only one of many ways to be successful. During my time at the foundation, I saw other states take different approaches, including creating incentives and setting up monitoring processes. What matters is having intentional structures and processes to bring about the changes I've described above.

WHAT'S ON YOUR WISH LIST?

I believe my wish list is both idealistic and practical. We have research and anecdotal evidence that show these steps are doable and beneficial. What we need now is awareness of the importance of a seamless approach to educator development and a shared commitment to making it happen. We can't get there by only preaching to the choir of our professional learning communities. Whatever our roles, we all need to reach out and build connections across institutions, levels, and systems.

At Learning Forward, we know this is an important component of improving teaching and learning, but not the only one. What does your professional learning wish list for 2025 and beyond look like? How can Learning Forward help fulfill it? Reach out to us and let us know so we can partner on the path to a reality where all educators' — and most importantly all students' — wishes for the future come true.

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Miladys Cepero-Perez, instructional supervisor, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida

MIAMI-DADE TEACHERS GROW WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING RESOURCES

Our aim is to nurture our teachers and help them become the best versions of themselves.

Miladys Cepero-Perez is an instructional supervisor in the Office of Professional Learning and Career Development for Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida, the 3rd-largest school district in the U.S. with 337,100 students. The district has more than 34,000 employees, making it one of the largest employers in Miami-Dade County. Cepero-Perez is a graduate of the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2024, a recipient of the Learning Forward Foundation's Stephanie Hirsh Scholarship, and a director at large for the Learning Forward Florida Affiliate's board of directors.

What is your district's vision for professional learning?

In our district, everybody works toward the goal of preparing, retaining, and giving our employees the opportunity to grow professionally. We believe in a holistic approach, understanding that supporting the whole teacher has a direct impact on the whole child. Our aim is to nurture our teachers and help them become the best versions of themselves.

Central to this vision is the concept of reflection. Every professional learning session incorporates a reflection component, encouraging participants to provide feedback on our work. We constantly ask ourselves: What should be our next goal? What else can we design in the future to be relevant, intentional, and strategic in designing and facilitating high-quality professional learning?

In our district, collaboration between departments and professional learning providers is essential. We have a professional learning support team in each school. These teams personalize educators' learning to the specific needs of the students and teachers. On a mandatory professional learning day in a district this large, the teachers have many alternatives and choices offered by different departments and the professional learning support team at the school level. It's like a grand fiesta of professional learning across the district. Everybody works together to provide professional learning that is high-quality, relevant, and student- and teacher-centered.

How do Learning Forward resources support your work?

Learning Forward plays a crucial role in helping us visualize how that cycle of continuous improvement looks for our elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. As an instructional supervisor, when I read each issue of *The Learning Professional*, I am afforded the opportunity to share resources with my team. *The Learning Professional* offers an incredible professional learning library menu for all educators and school leaders. I know the vision for the department, so I can align it with my colleagues' aspirations and share resources through personalized emails. For instance, I have sent emails that say, "Look what Learning Forward is sharing. I know you would like to learn a little bit more about this." This practice starts conversations among colleagues. I appreciate that every article is research-based, relevant, and practical to implement right away.

The Learning Forward Annual Conference is also a valuable professional learning opportunity

that our team is committed to. I have been attending the conference every year for over 10 years. Attending the Learning Forward conference with my team has been incredibly beneficial. We gained valuable insights into the latest research-based strategies and practical tools for immediate implementation. The experience also fostered stronger collaboration and inspired us to bring innovative ideas back to our school district.

After we come back from the Learning Forward conference, we reflect on our experiences and consider how we can apply our learning to fulfill the vision of the district and its professional learning goals. This also helps us design our internal conferences. We bring back books as well as ideas from the speakers, presenters, and colleagues, which helps us propel the learning of our teachers.

What role has the Learning Forward Academy played in your and your district's professional growth?

In our district, we have many proud Learning Forward Academy graduates, including a few of us who are in the Class of 2024. Participating in the academy has become prestigious among my team because it enhances our skills as professional learning providers and experts, fostering a culture of growth.

The academy equipped us with specific ideas and resources, such as Stephanie Hirsh and Tracy Crow's book *Becoming a Learning Team*. We are working on creating learning teams and learning communities in every school and aligning those teams with the needs of our schools and our teachers. This initiative has been impactful.

In addition, we delved into Joellen Killion's KASAB framework, which stands for knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors. This framework, combined with data analysis techniques from Killion, has been instrumental in helping us design and implement effective professional learning experiences tailored to the specific needs of our educators. By analyzing data, we can better understand the impact of our professional learning initiatives and continuously improve them.

What drives your passion for professional learning?

What drives my passion for professional learning is the profound impact it has on the lives of children, teachers, and the education community. Being in this field carries a huge responsibility, as it involves continuously evaluating our practices to impact educators' professional growth, identifying opportunities, and seeking the next steps for improvement to stay relevant in our field.

One of my favorite things I share with my instructors and team members is that I don't think I am at my best yet. I say that because the day you think you're at your best, you stop learning or embracing the learning experiences of other people. It's the learning experiences that make us better professionals, enabling us to best serve teachers and students. ■

EQUITY-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP CAN TRANSFORM INTENTION INTO ACTION

Creating schools where all students thrive requires sustained attention, inquiry, and commitment to professional growth.

Ayesha Farag is assistant superintendent for elementary education in Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts, 2021 graduate of the Learning Forward Academy, and coach of the Academy Class of 2026.

I recently attended the National Blue Ribbon Schools ceremony, where the U.S. Department of Education recognized 356 schools. One of those schools was Angier Elementary School from Newton (Massachusetts) Public Schools, where I am an assistant superintendent. Angier was recognized for its staff's exemplary efforts in raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. This school, like all of those honored at the ceremony, is dedicated to building environments where every student thrives, exemplifying what's possible when growth, inclusivity, and high expectations for all guide school priorities.

Supporting all students to learn and grow is central to our work as educators. We are entrusted with ensuring every child receives a high-quality education that delivers the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for fulfilling personal and professional futures. This commitment to every child is not only fundamental to our mission but has been called out as a national policy priority for decades in legislation that aims to address disparities in student opportunity and achievement.

Educational equity, therefore, should not be controversial. When we strip away the politics, the word "equity" captures educators' commitment to creating schools that invest in every student's potential. Educational excellence is defined by inclusion and belonging for every student, high expectations for all, and ensuring that factors such as race, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status are not predictive of student outcomes. Every educator is responsible for creating environments where those characteristics are true. I believe few educators would dispute that.

However, fulfilling that vision isn't automatic, even when all educators believe in it. Creating schools where all students thrive requires sustained attention, inquiry, and commitment to professional growth. Professional learning is a catalyst that can transform good intentions into meaningful action.

THREE KEY ACTIONS FOR EQUITY-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP

District and school leaders play a critical role in establishing and sustaining professional learning that builds teachers' capacity to support every child's success. We set expectations, provide resources, and regularly analyze data on student learning. As we do so, here are three things to keep in mind to ensure that our professional learning is focused on equity.

Encourage self-reflection about identity.

Recognizing and celebrating identity — who we are and what we bring — establishes a foundation of trust and belonging. When students feel seen, valued, and able to bring their authentic selves into learning spaces, they are more empowered to engage fully and take the risks that are essential for deep learning.

To nurture students' identity development, educators should deepen their understanding of their own identity. Leaders should model self-reflection and foster environments where educators
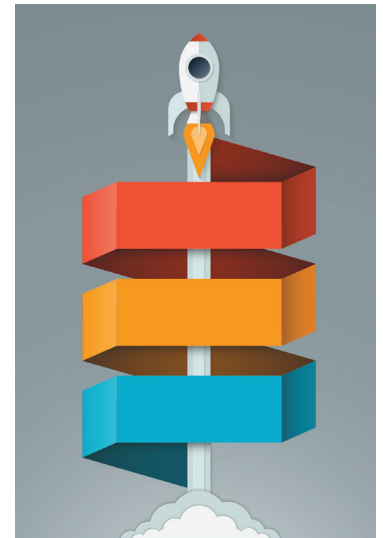
examine how their experiences and backgrounds have shaped their identity development, including their beliefs, values, expectations, assumptions, and feelings of dignity and belonging. For example, in my district, we supported this type of reflection through learning about racial identity development, beginning with central staff. Through facilitated sessions led by our director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, our central staff team explored racial identity development models and shared experiences that deepened our self-awareness. As a principal supervisor, I continued this work with the elementary principals on my team, who in turn integrated learning about identity development into their school-based professional learning.

Engaging in self-reflection and collegial discussion helps educators uncover beliefs and assumptions that can limit opportunities and diminish expectations for some learners. For example, our student services department has challenged us as a system to examine how our ideas and misconceptions about disability can manifest as ableism within school practices that impact students' opportunities for growth and belonging. This kind of ongoing reflection on our assumptions and systems is critical to identifying and addressing factors that impede our efforts to create inclusive learning environments that support all learners.

Champion asset-based thinking.

During her speech at the National Blue Ribbon Schools event, National Teacher of the Year Missy Testerman highlighted the power of educators who approach their work as "talent scouts" rather than "deficit detectives" — those who actively seek out all students' strengths, cultural wealth, and interests as essential resources for growth. Thinking about ourselves as talent

scouts invites us to see and invest in our students through the lens of potential and possibility, focusing on how to build on their strengths to support their growth.

This asset-based approach has been a consistent focus in our district's professional learning around culturally responsive instruction, with an emphasis on recognizing and building on the varied and special strengths each student brings. This is evident, for example, in our district English language learner department consistently emphasizing the power of multilingualism. They guide teachers to leverage students' primary languages as learning tools, incorporate students' cultural knowledge into lessons, and celebrate the cognitive advantages of multilingual thinking. These practices don't just support our multilingual learners, they enrich the learning experience for all students.

Build collaborative and accountable learning environments.

To support all learners effectively, educators must bring a deliberate focus to the impact of their instruction and be responsive when students aren't progressing as expected. This means being particularly attuned to patterns in who is advancing and who may be struggling, approaching these patterns with curiosity and persistence to understand underlying causes.

No educator can do this alone. Leaders play a vital role in fostering collaborative teams where educators work together to identify what they want all students to learn and how best to support that learning.

A key component of teams' work is analyzing data through an equity lens, with guiding questions such as: Who is benefiting from our practices? Who is being left out? How can we ensure all students have access to grade-level

instruction? What might we need to learn more about to address disparities in student experience and outcomes?

Bringing an explicit focus to goal setting is another strategy. In the Learning Forward Academy, where I serve as a coach, we guide participants in the development of SMARTIE goals — specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound, inclusive, and equitable.

Embedding inclusivity and equity (the I and the E) into these goals fosters a culture of inquiry and accountability, where teams are encouraged to engage in purposeful dialogue and explore solutions that address root causes of inequity. This approach goes beyond simply identifying issues. It requires educators to consider alternative strategies, adjust practices, and commit to interventions that create equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for every student.

EXCELLENCE FOR ALL LEARNERS

As a parent, I know the depth of trust I placed in schools to care for, challenge, and support my children on the path to their futures. As educators, our collective responsibility is to advocate for every child with this same level of commitment. Every child deserves our unwavering care, attention, support, and guidance to help them flourish.

The recently recognized Blue Ribbon Schools exemplify the transformative impact educators can have when they commit to equity and high standards for every student. With a deliberate focus on high expectations and a commitment to learning, leaders and their teams hold the power to create meaningful change and fulfill our responsibilities to equip all learners with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to lead fulfilling lives and positively impact the world around them. ■

5 STRATEGIES KEEP POLARIZATION FROM DERAILING TEAMS

L eadership teams increasingly have to deal with strong opinions on both sides of issues when working within the team and with external stakeholders. This should not be surprising considering historical trends. Since the 1980s, partisan political polarization has become a defining feature of our political system. Today, Democratic and Republican members of the U.S. Congress are further apart ideologically as measured by roll call voting than they have been since measurement began in the 1880s (Lewis, 2023). And at least when it comes to national issues, state and local officials once thought to be insulated from these debates are aligned with their party's position, even more so than with their constituents' beliefs (Lee et al., 2023).

Debates over policy are often tinged by increasingly negative feeling toward the "other party." According to one study, more than 80% of Republicans say Democrats are "brainwashed" and "hateful," while more than 80% of Democrats say the same about Republicans (Hawkins et al., 2022). This risks avoiding the other side or seeing them as different or immoral (Finkel et al., 2020).

It's not surprising, then, that polarization has spread to K-12 education, as shown in disagreements over books, bathrooms, and how history is taught. The intrusion of political issues and opinions was cited as the top source of stress for superintendents of large districts in spring 2024 and the fifth most common source for those in small districts, though, happily, this is down from 2023 (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2024).

In this landscape, leadership teams — like all teams — are likely to experience disagreements and conflicts. Preventing or avoiding them entirely is not possible, and not even desirable. Having team members with a diversity of perspectives is an asset. When those team members listen to each other, capitalize on each other's skills, and learn and grow together, they stretch their thinking and ultimately get more done for the benefit of students. Facilitating that kind of stretching takes planning and skill. Here are some steps you can take to make the most of diverse perspectives on your team, along with reflection questions to move your work forward.

Know and respect each member's values.

Values drive people's behavior in every setting, personal and professional. In schools, values are visible in many ways, including the way people interact in classrooms and hallways and in the student work posted on bulletin boards and websites. In any setting, values exert an influence, whether or not the values are stated explicitly.

This can make group dynamics complex. When people hold values in common, those values can become a rallying cry to unite everyone. But when people hold differing values, this can easily result in polarization. A leader needs to know and respect the values of all team members and not inadvertently create conflict for members with their values.

The key here is to never assume what people's values are and instead seek to learn about them. Once those values are known, the leader might have members develop ways that their goals can be furthered by achieving the team's goals. But perhaps most important is to not inadvertently create conflict for members between the team's work and their personal goals. For example, if people value teamwork, the leader shouldn't set up competitions. If team members value work/life balance, team meetings should take place during the school day and not interfere with personal family time.

Agree on your vision, goals, and nonnegotiables.

A vision is an aspirational and inspirational statement of a desired future. It is a galvanizing statement that can be referenced as things get more polarized to remind the group of its larger aims. It is important that all group members agree on the vision statement and its wording. It

Preventing or avoiding disagreements and conflicts entirely is not possible, and not even desirable. Having team members with a diversity of perspectives is an asset.

Jody Spiro is a professor and author in education leadership and systems change and a senior advisor to Learning Forward. Lucas Held is a senior strategic communications consultant who works with leaders in K-12, higher education, and philanthropy.

becomes the basis of the actions you will take and reflects the values of the team and the larger community.

Once you have accomplished that, it is important to lay out — upfront — anything that is bedrock and cannot be compromised. Stating this up front will prevent the team from spinning its wheels considering options that cannot be changed. Everything else can be negotiated.

Understand where you agree and disagree — and agree to disagree.

Many teams cop out and say that "our similarities are greater than our differences." That is hopefully the case, but sweeping differences under the rug denies the reality of the situation and deprives the team of the value such divergent perspectives provide. It is important to surface the areas where you agree and disagree and to understand why you agree or disagree. If agreement cannot be reached, agree to disagree, but in a respectful way.

Although it might be tempting to accept lip service agreements, this is a mistake. In an environment where people disagree, some might choose to say they agree or disengage rather than pursue conflict. This conflict will only surface later and derail your work.

The leader and team members might address this up front by having a ground rule specifying that people should always engage and surface their opinions (in constructive language), as opposed to staying silent.

Another way to avoid lip service agreements is for the leader to ask questions that are grounded in action. For example: "How might this play out?" Talking about the implications is clarifying for all and demonstrates that team members are aware of the results, not just the words.

Avoid trigger words.

To lessen the chance that those on the team, and external stakeholders, will misinterpret what you say, it is important to think carefully about the language you use. What do others *hear* when you describe the work? If certain words trigger polarized reactions, it might make sense to avoid those words and be more specific with your language (Leading Now, 2024).

This is not an attempt to deceive anyone, but a choice to use different words — perhaps more specific words — to be better understood. An advantage of avoiding trigger words is that when there is division, you will know that it is about the activity itself and not the words. Knowing that sets you up to consider your options.

Ensure benefits for all concerned, even if differentiated.

An important way to avoid polarization is to ensure that there are benefits for everyone, even if they are different in scope for different groups. The benefits should reflect the values of the team and ensure that everyone benefits from the proposed work, albeit it in different ways.

Polarization sometimes results when people think something is being taken away from them to accommodate the new work. The point here is for everyone to benefit. In some cases, the team will have to think about what benefits those might be for those not directly affected by the proposed new work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The following questions can help your team capitalize on differing viewpoints. You can discuss them together or team leaders can reflect on them individually or in pairs to help determine the next steps with the team.

1. What values do your team members hold most dear? Are any held in common? Are any in conflict?
2. What are the shared vision and goals?
3. What is the bedrock of the team's work that cannot be compromised?
4. How can you demonstrate that your district or school provides benefits for all groups, even though those benefits may differ based on need?

Your responses to these questions, along with the strategies described above, can help your team build a sound foundation for dealing with polarized issues. You'll still need to decide on your team's stance on issues, e.g., whether to stay the course, change your language, negotiate an alternative, or pause, but making the most of diverse perspectives will help you make a well-informed decision.

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CHANGEMAKERS:
AUDREY VOHS

NOMINATED BY PETER CARPENTER

Audrey Vohs is the supervisor of leadership development in Harford County Public Schools in Maryland. Peter Carpenter, director of organizational development for the district, nominated Vohs for expanding leadership development across schools and roles.

Calling her work a model for other districts, Carpenter wrote that Vohs "is passionate about the development of our current leaders and the next generation of leadership. It's been really energizing seeing her blaze a trail for quality professional learning for our noninstructional staff."

BUILDING A SYSTEM TO DEVELOP LEADERS

"Audrey's main role is to develop current and future leaders in our system. Prior to 2022, (our district) had some informal structures for employee development, but Audrey has since worked to make them more structured. Guided by our district's core leadership competencies, the district's leadership pipeline now includes Future U, a six-week learning experience for prospective leaders in our system; Leadership Launch, an opportunity for new leaders to meet with central service administrators to build role capacity; and IMPACT, a two-year, highly personalized experience designed to support our new leaders collectively and individually.

"Audrey crafts learning experiences that meet our leaders where they are in real time, using survey and coaching session data. She finds patterns of need between her conversations and more structured professional learning sessions and crafts the next sessions based on those needs. This creates ongoing, sustained professional learning and leadership development for our newest leaders."

COACHING TO GROW INSTRUCTIONAL AND OPERATIONS LEADERSHIP

"Coaching skills are the bread and butter of Audrey's leadership. Credentialed through the International Coaching Federation and Gallup, Audrey provides individualized leadership coaching throughout the year to every administrator, based on their initial responses to the Gallup Strengthsfinder, which identifies assets and gives leaders a common language for understanding the 'why' behind their actions. She helps people understand how to solve their problems by using powerful questions and connecting them to leaders' assets.

CORE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

HCPS Leaders are...

Instructionally savvy · Enterprise experts

Thoughtful builders · Ethical stewards · Upholders for equity

Emotionally intelligent · Mindful managers · Lead learners

Intentional collaborators · Talent developers · Systems influencers

HARFORD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Published by the HCPS Professional Development Advisory Council (PDAC).

"In addition to working with instructional leaders, Audrey has begun coaching cycles with operational leaders. Our lead food and nutrition staff, as well as our custodial support staff, rave about the work and are enhancing the mindsets of belonging in their kitchens for staff and students alike.

"Many other leaders have said that Audrey's coaching has helped them lead better and has promoted better outcomes. Anecdotal data shows that people are more content with their work, and more and more employees are asking Audrey to coach them.

"With each coaching conversation, Audrey builds trust. Over time, that trust has compounded. Because she started building trust at the individual level, we are now ready to take on more scaled versions of professional learning. We are so fortunate to have a learning leader of Audrey's caliber in our office." ■
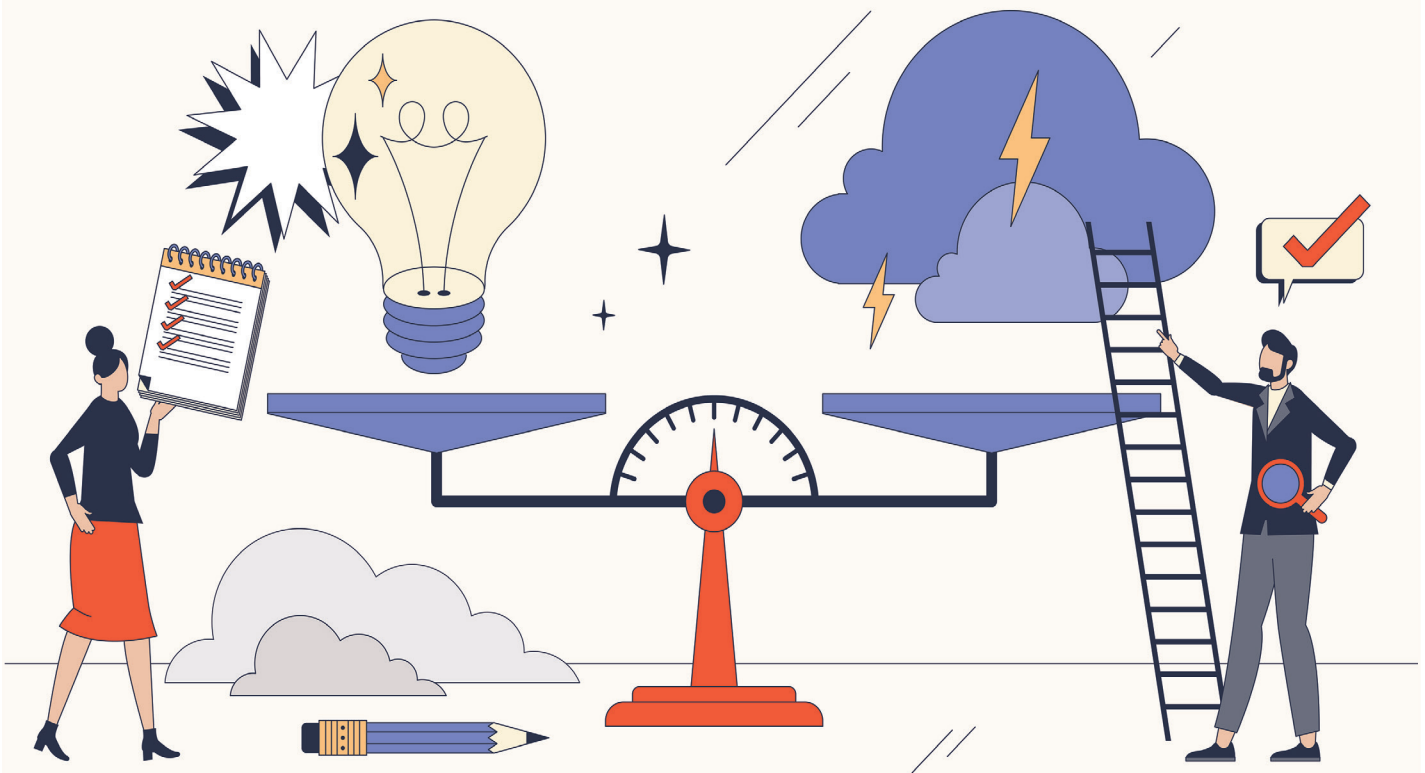
RESEARCH

5 TIPS FOR EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In her Research & Evaluation column, Elizabeth Foster, Learning Forward senior vice president, research & standards, explains why evaluating professional learning is important and offers these five tips to help plan and implement professional learning evaluation, regardless of your experience or resources. Learn more in her column on p. 18.

1. Start with the why.
2. Use a conceptual framework.
3. Articulate the intended outcomes.
4. Seek multiple sources of data.
5. Engage stakeholders.

Elizabeth Foster

5 TIPS FOR DOCUMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING'S IMPACT

As professional learning leaders, it is our responsibility to document how improving professional learning systems leads to better outcomes for educators and students.

L earning Forward is committed to documenting the impact of professional learning, including changes in educators' knowledge, skills, beliefs and practices, and, ultimately, changes in student outcomes. Evaluating impact helps stakeholders at many levels make decisions based on what works best, for whom, and why. It also helps professional learning leaders make the case for maintaining investments, ensuring strategic support, and prioritizing professional learning.

Despite widespread appreciation for the importance of evaluation, all too often those who collect data focus only on participants' experiences,

stopping short of examining impact on teaching, leading, and student learning. Sometimes this is because of a false assumption that evaluating outcomes requires significant financial resources or external expertise.

In truth, everyone can conduct some type of impact evaluation in a way that makes sense for their context, research questions, and needs — and everyone should, as we articulate in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). Here are five tips to help you plan and implement professional learning evaluation, regardless of your experience or resources.
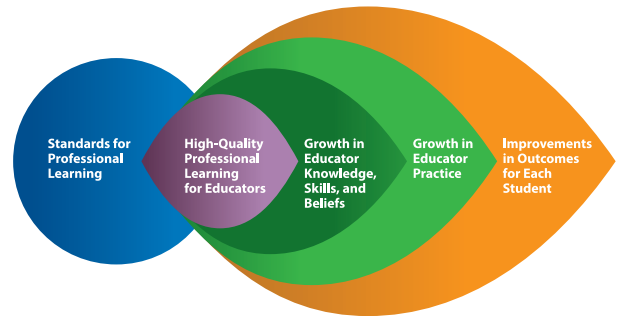
1. Start with the why.

Evaluation for evaluation's sake isn't helpful for anyone. Evaluation should always have a defined purpose and goals, which are determined by the context and stakeholders' needs.

In a recent article for *The Learning Professional*, Joellen Killion (2024) summarizes seven common purposes for evaluation: problem identification, planning, quality, implementation, effectiveness, impact on students, and social justice and human rights.

As Killion explains, the purpose drives the research questions and methods. For instance, she writes, focusing on social justice and human rights should drive evaluators to look at whether the professional learning is inclusive and responsive to multiple cultures, contexts, and needs. Their evaluations might examine representation of multiple communities and cultures, equitable distribution of resources, and whether "new practices are consistently and accurately applied in all contexts to ensure that no student is being denied opportunity to learn."

2. Use a conceptual framework.

At the outset, it's important to understand how and why you expect the professional learning to lead to specific impacts. A conceptual framework lays the groundwork for both your professional learning design and evaluation.

The Standards for Professional Learning provide a framework for a comprehensive, coherent system of professional learning, setting the stage for meaningful data and evidence collection about professional learning and its intended outcomes for educators and students. Learning Forward developed the graphic above to explain the pathway through which the standards should lead to improved student outcomes.

Elizabeth Foster is senior vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. Contact her at elizabeth.foster@ learningforward. org with questions or topic suggestions for future issues.

We use the graphic to guide the types of data and evidence to collect and the way to examine the data to see whether the intended pathway is realized. At each step, we seek the best available data sources, which depend on the context, timing, and intended outcomes. Other users and stakeholders can also use this graphic when considering the impact of standards-aligned professional learning.

3. Articulate the intended outcomes.

Too many conversations about professional learning fail to include a discussion of what exactly we expect to happen as a result of educators' participation.

Evaluation designers and stakeholders should spend time with those who design and implement professional learning to clarify what changes are intended, realistic, and achievable within the time frame. Alternatively, if the same person or people are designing the learning and the evaluation, it helps to step back from the details of either one and consider the big picture of potential impacts. Sometimes this requires switching hats from designer to facilitator to evaluator. This kind of thinking benefits all of those roles and responsibilities.

For impact on educators, we look to Joellen Killion's (2018) recommendation to begin with a detailed logic model that articulates what will occur in the professional learning and how it links to the potential expected outcomes. Killion categorizes outcomes for educators as changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, or behaviors.

We also look to Thomas Guskey's chain of impact (2002) to determine what factors to measure, including characteristics of the professional learning, participants' experience, impacts on educators (immediate and long-term), and impacts on students and classrooms.

4. Seek multiple sources of data.

Once you have articulated the theory of action, it is important to have a conversation about the ways to collect meaningful and relevant data. Some types of data are more appropriate for certain research questions and program designs than others.

For example, if alignment to the Standards for Professional Learning is a key step in your district's professional learning and evaluation design, you can measure that alignment by examining the district's professional learning plan and strategic plan. You can also examine other documents and interactions, such as the expectations for staffwide learning shared at the beginning of the professional learning.

As another example, if the goal of a professional learning session is to strengthen facilitators' understanding of the standards, you might use assessments about key concepts in the standards and compare facilitators' understanding on pre- and post-tests. If the facilitators will work on this content over multiple sessions or during an ongoing course, you might measure participants' use and application of their new knowledge during coaching sessions or workshops with teachers.

Evaluators should consider the burden on participants when gathering data, both in terms of time and stress level. For instance, observations of a classroom by a coach can provide useful evidence of a teacher's application of learning, but it is important to make adequate time for that and be clear about whether the data will be used as part of teachers' formal teaching evaluations, as a tool for coaching conversations, or strictly as a research tool.

Evaluators should also think expansively and creatively about the kind of data that are available. Large-scale summative assessments, such as end-of-year grades or test scores, are not the only meaningful sources of student data. Most schools have relevant formative and qualitative data, such as exit tickets and end-of-unit tests.

Including teachers in the discussion about what data to collect can yield other valuable ideas.

5. Engage stakeholders.

Engaging participants, including teachers, students, and families, in discussions about the value of collecting evidence can be valuable in a number of ways. When educators recognize the importance of tracking their progress, they may be more willing to participate in surveys, focus groups, and interviews. They may have ideas about what data to collect and how. And keeping everyone informed about the results leads to broader understanding and more accountability for impact.

It is important to regularly examine whether the conversations about evaluation, evidence, and data are inclusive of all participants, especially those who have traditionally been excluded. This leads to more trust and collaboration a well as better data.

ADDING TO THE EVIDENCE

Building the evidence base for how professional learning impacts educators and students is a shared responsibility among professional learning designers, facilitators, leaders, and others. While one evaluation alone will not convince policymakers about the value of professional learning investments, each contribution is a piece of the puzzle and adds to the evidence that professional learning makes a positive difference in education.

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DATA POINTS

3 **KEY BUILDING BLOCKS FOR DEVELOPING DEEPER LEARNING**

This RAND report, based on surveys administered to American School District Panel member district leaders, focuses on elements that promote students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. To develop these abilities in youth, district leaders reported three essential building blocks: allotting educator collaboration time for setting goals and working backward from those goals, high-quality teacher training combined with modeling and coaching, and student progress monitoring that includes collaboration among teachers and staff to examine student work. **bit.ly/4hvQQaw**

88% **OF COMPUTER SCIENCE TEACHERS WANT ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

According to a report on the state of computer science education, 88% of computer science teachers agreed they need professional learning to teach effectively with and about artificial intelligence. The report, from a coalition of organizations promoting coding and computer science literacy, also notes that schools may need help to employ qualified computer science teachers. The report goes on to say that schools can successfully bring computer science to all students through alternative solutions such as integrating computer science into other subject areas, virtually connecting to courses in neighboring districts, using state virtual schools, or leveraging dual enrollment course opportunities. **bit.ly/3NUcWG6**

20% **SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER IN LARGEST U.S. DISTRICTS**

ILO Group, a woman-founded national education strategy and policy firm, released findings from its Superintendent Research Project. It found that between July 2023 and July 2024, 100 of the top 500 largest U.S. school districts experienced a 20% leadership turnover rate, similar to the prior year. This exceeds the turnover rate cited in earlier years, which was 14% to 16%. ILO Group researchers also found that women hold 30.4% of superintendencies despite filling nearly eight in 10 teaching positions and more than half of the principal jobs. When positions open, men replace men seven out of 10 times, and men replace women six out of 10 times. **bit.ly/3CdasjD**

2 **ILLINOIS SURVEYS DIG INTO RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT**

Two Illinois educator surveys revealed a mismatch in perceptions of what causes educator shortages. In one survey, 3,478 educators — 47% former educators and 77% currently working — consider quality relationships with leaders a vital factor in staying or leaving the field. In a second survey, 50% of the 756 respondents thought insufficient compensation was responsible for educator departures, and 49% said it was due to demanding workloads.

The data reflected the importance of these relationships. 63% of current educators reported having supportive relationships with leaders, while this was true for only 36% of former educators. 40% of both educators and leaders agreed that their compensation was fair. Beyond the structural factors of pay and workload, the researchers underscore the importance of simultaneously developing and retaining good leaders and educators and that investing in relationships is essential. **bit.ly/40y4NPi**

480+ **DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS REFLECT ON ESSER FUNDING**

Researchers from McKinsey & Company polled school administrators about how they used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. More than 480 public and charter school district administrators responded, representing a variety of district sizes and family income levels. In reflecting on spending, many school district leaders reported wishing they had spent more on a series of interventions that addressed pandemic impacts, including retaining and supporting the professional learning of teachers and staff. Overall, 75% of respondents believe their allocation of stimulus funds was effective in achieving their goals over the past three years. **mck.co/48BKLVN**

RESIDENCIES MAKE TEACHER PATHWAYS MORE EQUITABLE

As part of a project to make teacher pathways more equitable and increase teacher diversity, the California Educator Preparation Innovation Collaborative (CalEPIC) teamed up with policy and strategy organization Education First and educator preparation programs and districts across California to engage in teacher residency redesign. Paid residencies are now leading to a more diverse pool of teacher candidates, more robust teacher preparation, and ongoing professional growth. See the article on p. 28.

A coaching endorsement program blossoms in Utah

BY KATIE DEWEY HILL AND JANICE BRADLEY

How do we develop the capacity for every instructional coach to provide job-embedded professional learning for every teacher and student? This was the question facing the Utah State Board of Education in 2020. To address this, the state board's quality instruction team designed and built a statewide networked professional learning system that includes instructional coaches, local education agencies, administrators, state leaders, and university partners.

The quality instruction team had already developed a set of instructional coaching competencies, which defined the skills of an effective instructional coach. Educators could earn a new coaching endorsement, added to their educator license, based on demonstration of the competencies. But a key ingredient was missing: professional learning aligned to the competencies through which an educator could develop their skills and gain the endorsement.

Beginning in February 2020, our team began envisioning a systemic, scalable way for the quality instruction

PARTNERS FOR STATEWIDE NETWORKED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

Partner	Description	Why important
State superintendent	Championed the Standards for Professional Learning and supported implementation through coaching by ensuring these standards were written into Utah Code 53G-11-303 as a requirement for professional learning for educators in Utah.	These standards were used as a minimum requirement for professional learning to count for USBE credit, which can be a means to advance educators' salaries in many Utah districts.
Local education agency leaders	Adopted these coaching competencies as an expectation for the work coaches were meant to do in the schools. Many leaders supported the expectation that newly hired coaches either already possessed the USBE Instructional Coaching Endorsement or were willing to attain it within the first years in the position.	Local education agency leaders opened doors, provided resources, and created paths for coaches to grow toward the expectations of meeting these competencies. Leaders helped sustain the program through personnel changes, competing mandates, or other events that could potentially disrupt the momentum of the program.
Instructional coaches	Provided coaching for educators and helped develop structures and supports as well as connections to one another to explore problems of practice, current realities that should be incorporated into learning designs, and ongoing support for continued professional learning.	Providing coaching competence and expertise for educators and students created the conditions that resulted in growth and improvement.
Administrators	Set the culture of learning for a school and reinforced priority actions that drove improvement in dramatic ways for students.	Aligned with the work a coach should do, this resulted in teachers being more willing to engage in the vulnerability that coaching demands.
University instructors	Invited the state's quality instruction coordinator into course classes to create a partnership that connected the Utah State Board of Education instructional coaching goals to the work of graduate students learning to become instructional coaches.	Collaborating with instructors who prepare leaders is critical to helping them become competent and well-prepared coaches. Engaging with future coaches sets expectations for how to best lead a culture where coaching is supported and to reflect on best practices that other coaches can learn from.
Regional service agencies	Provided professional learning for coaching to several districts within their rural regions.	Service agencies are critical for capacity building in the smaller districts and helped develop coaches who can serve in each school within many small districts.
School board members	Listened to educators describe how coaching supported stronger teaching and created paths for coaching positions to be funded.	School boards approve funding for the personnel for coaching programs. Their support is critical to providing the necessary resources for coaching to be effective.

office to support such professional learning. We ultimately developed the USBE Instructional Coaching Endorsement, based on best practices in coaching (Aguilar, 2013; Killion et al., 2020; Knight, 2017) and the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). In designing the program, we paid particular attention to common implementation barriers and strategic ways to remove those barriers, such as using high-impact, low time commitment strategies for achievable and manageable implementation.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS

To balance the need to create sustained professional learning with limited personnel from the state office, we needed to build bridges to all those with a stake in the effectiveness of instructional coaching and professional learning throughout Utah. From the outset, we knew partnerships were important for developing a shared understanding of coaching competencies across the state, in both urban and rural areas. We also wanted to communicate the value of the coach's role to decision-makers who influence investments and funding allocations.

We drew on and further cultivated relationships with the state superintendent, local education agency leaders, instructional coaches, administrators, university instructors, regional service agencies, and local school board members. The table on p. 23 outlines the critical roles they played in realizing the success of the statewide system.

Regional service agencies play an important role, particularly in supporting rural and small local education agencies that have historically not had the same access to coaching support and alignment to the state board's resources and initiatives. The result has been more investment in coaching and more access to knowledgeable coaches for more classroom teachers.

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CAPACITY BUILDING MODEL

At the heart of this initiative is the instructional coaching capacity building model (see table on p. 25), which has three components:

- **Coursework**, which builds instructional coaches' professional expertise and competencies. Participants engage in three courses, one each in the fall, spring, and summer semesters: Foundations of Instructional Coaching, Adult Learning Theory, and Instructional Design and Assessment.
- **Community of practice,** which provides opportunities to develop a culture of collaborative inquiry among coaches across the state.
- **Personalized support** from expert coaches and field leaders to ensure access to timely and individualized assistance for each coach's needs.

The model's design recognizes that professional learning must be ongoing and sustained to impact practice and that professional development with a one-time single engagement session would not be enough to accomplish the goal of building capacity for coaching in all schools.

The model was also designed around the categories of the Standards for Professional Learning to ensure coaches engage in rigorous content, transformational processes, and conditions for success (Foster, 2022; Learning Forward, 2022). The Utah state board is committed to implementing the standards throughout the state to improve the professional learning experiences of Utah's educators.

Attendance in monthly sessions includes 30 to 40 coaches and leaders joining the live session, with additional participants viewing the recording and contributing to the application discussion in the online course. More than 350 coaches and leaders subscribe to an email discussion group where we post coaching updates such as meetings and resources.

Through connection to the coaching group, quality instructional coordinators from the state board can visit coaches in local education agencies, attend and facilitate course meetings, and show support for their work. Statewide conferences, such as the Utah Coalition for Education Technology and Utah Rural Schools Association, have dedicated coaching strands in which coaches from across the state present and participate in sessions that extend impact to the wider community.

As coaches engage in the courses, community of practice, and personalized support, they deepen their knowledge of the standards. Then, guided by the standards, they can facilitate the same courses in their own context for existing and aspiring coaches. This improves the quality of coaching and makes best practices in professional learning a habit.

Through learning about what has worked well in the coaching program, team members at the state board also learned about the conditions needed for success, which includes who needs to be included in the process of developing the local programs, who needs to facilitate, and who needs to be invited to participate. Designing the courses with thorough facilitator notes, guides, and technology support helped remove the resource barriers that can derail the most well-intentioned programs.

THE IMPACT ON EDUCATORS

More than 850 educators have participated in the yearlong professional learning included in the Instructional Coaching Endorsement

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CAPACITY BUILDING MODEL COMPONENTS

Component	Actions
Coursework	• Monthly in-person sessions designed with learning intentions, facilitator notes, and connection to the competencies • Application work to be done between sessions, designed in Canvas and shared with authorized facilitators
Community of practice	• Monthly sessions on Zoom, recorded and available to those who miss a session • In-person meetings also facilitated three to four times in the year • Professional learning content focused on a cohesive idea, such as the Utah Effective Teaching Standards and coaching
Personalized support	• Consulting with coaching leaders on methods of support that are unique to their contexts • Speaking in coaching course meetings facilitated by local education agencies • Connecting local education agencies with one another to support coaching

course series since 2020, and the learning continues today. Some districts now require completion of this endorsement for educators applying to instructional coach positions, which has resulted in a hiring pool with stronger understanding of the fundamentals of effective coaching and clarity about the role.

One large district leveraged this endorsement to create a shared understanding of the expectations for coaching roles in each content or specialty area. The district created a structure for diverse departments to collaborate, ensuring classroom teachers have aligned support from the various coaches and specialists as they work to build practice. Formerly, coaches and specialists sometimes competed for teachers' or administrators' attention. Now they can more readily collaborate with one another, ensuring students are the focus of the coaching work and teachers have the opportunity to maximize coaching.

We see results of the Instructional Coaching Endorsement program in diverse parts of the state. Coaching has seen a greater investment in rural communities, as education leaders recognize that an important component of teacher retention is support for practice. In more urban settings, coaching has historically been more prolific, but the challenges with coordinating multiple coaches have been difficult in some settings.

The endorsement has helped leaders in many of these districts have conversations that have led to improved coordination. This ensures that different departments have a shared vision for what coaching should accomplish and challenges coaches to work together to meet the needs of educators and their students.

Perhaps most importantly, the model is helping participants apply the coaching competencies in a meaningful way in the service of improved instructional practice. For example, in Utah we emphasize the importance of personalizing instruction for students according to the Universal Design for Learning model (Rose & Dolan, 2000; CAST, 2024).

Coaches report a greater understanding of how to personalize instruction for K-12 students, as well as personalizing professional learning for their teachers. This has brought more consideration for learning designs as they align with the Standards for Professional Learning, adult learning best practices, and how coaching can sustain the learning through application in practice. This has been evident in learning design proposals submitted to the state board having shown increased meaningful alignment to the standards.

GROWING THE PARTNERSHIP

A statewide coaching community of practice meets monthly to connect coaches who wouldn't otherwise meet. They find value in seeing how others in their position have addressed the problems of practice that are relatable to their own situations. Coaching can be a unique and often lonely role. Meeting other coaches has helped participants be part of a network of others developing their craft in this specific context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lotter et al., 2014). This community of practice has also helped keep the decisions made at the state level connected to the realities

encountered in Utah schools.

Coaching work is vital to sustaining professional learning and has driven the vision for systems of support to help define the role and the competencies necessary to coach effectively. The bridges built between the Utah State Board of Education and statewide partners have helped decision-makers across the system prioritize the important coaching position, communicate to stakeholders the importance of professional learning through coaching, and build capacity for greater growth for educators and students in every corner of the state.

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Katie Dewey Hill is the quality instructional coordinator at the Utah State Board of Education. Janice Bradley is an adjunct associate professor at the University of Utah and an education consultant. ■

The Elements
of Curriculum-Based Professional Learning

Core Design Features	Functional Design Features		Structural Design Features
Cu Curriculum			**CP** Collective Participation
TL Transformative Learning	**LD** Learning Designs	**Be** Beliefs	**Mo** Models
Eq Equity	**RF** Reflection & Feedback	**CM** Change Management	**Tm** Time

The Essentials

Le Leadership	**Re** Resources	**Co** Coherence

HOW DO WE ENSURE CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SUPPORTS BOTH 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.

Watch curriculum-based professional learning in action

Read the report, *The Elements*

Read a chapter from the book, *Transforming Teaching through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning*

Carnegie
CORPORATION OF NEW YORK

A more equitable model for teacher residencies

BY DEBRA RUSSELL, MEGHAN COSIER, AND REBECCA HATKOFF

School districts and educator preparation programs are important partners in the professional learning ecosystem. Their strong relationships have long been lauded as the gold standard of preparing and retaining high-quality teachers, yet they have been slow to develop robust reciprocal relationships that

can address intensifying challenges of teacher recruitment and attrition (Guha et al., 2016). When districts and program partners work together to think more strategically about systems of preparation and support, they can make important progress toward equity for educators and students.

One promising model is the development of sustainable paid teacher

residencies, in which teacher candidates enrolled in coursework are paid to work in districts under the supervision of mentor teachers. When designed well, these residencies can benefit everyone involved — both new and veteran teachers and, ultimately, students.

As part of a project to make teacher pathways more equitable and increase teacher diversity, the California

Educator Preparation Innovation Collaborative (CalEPIC), a technical assistance center under the umbrella of the Thompson Policy Institute on Disability based at Chapman University, teamed up with policy and strategy organization Education First and educator preparation programs and districts across California to engage in teacher residency redesign. Paid residencies are now leading to a more diverse pool of teacher candidates, more robust teacher preparation, and ongoing professional growth.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHER RESIDENCIES

Teacher residencies — modeled after medical residencies and offering authentic, immersive classroom experiences — emerged in the early 2000s as more effective than traditional pathways for preparing future teachers.

Residents are teacher candidates enrolled in educator preparation programs who are engaged in school communities and paid a stipend to reflect their contributions in classrooms. While completing their coursework and working toward their student teaching requirements, residents receive support in the field and embedded mentorship from experienced teachers.

Well-designed teacher residencies upend the traditional relationship between universities and districts, which has largely been transactional: Educator preparation programs produce new teacher candidates, and districts find student teaching placements for

them. If teacher vacancies align with a candidate's credentials, the district may hire that candidate for the next school year (Hatkoff & Russell, 2024).

This very common scenario does not always promote equity or facilitate meaningful collaboration. For instance, an educator preparation program's candidate pool might not align with districts' efforts to hire educators that research shows will best support their students, including those who reflect their student demographics and know their local school communities.

Residencies change this relationship to be more collaborative because districts and programs work together to align candidates' coursework, classroom experiences, and supervision from experienced teachers. Research shows that residency programs produce candidates who not only become more effective teachers once in their own classrooms, but also have higher rates of retention (Laski, 2024; Patrick et al., 2023). Residencies are therefore a promising way to address education policymakers' concerns about a leaky bucket of attrition, in which it's hard for new teachers to make up for vacancies as educators are entering and leaving the profession at similar rates.

Teacher shortages persist across all U.S. states, impacting both the equitable learning outcomes for students and the well-being of the teachers being asked to take on more and more responsibilities because of recurring vacancies (Schultz, 2024; Munger, Tolles & Olson, 2024).

This puts financial strain on districts — for example, in California, it costs upwards of $20,000 to recruit, hire, and train each new educator (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). And districts report these costs are increasing as competition for diverse candidates grows, necessitating more expansive and more expensive teacher recruitment efforts. This situation underscores the importance of programs that have been shown to boost teacher retention.

Despite their potential to address these problems and their positive outcomes, residency programs have struggled to gain traction because many candidates enrolled in teacher education coursework are simply unable to forgo a year of income to participate (Lambert, 2023). This is especially true of candidates from low-income and historically marginalized communities — the very candidates many education leaders want to recruit. Residency programs therefore need to be funded if they are to embody and create equity.

One way districts can do that is by reallocating sustainable funds from other initiatives to support residencies. This can open a more accessible pathway for lower-income candidates who historically were unable to participate in full-year residencies. Paid residencies help diversify the new teacher pipeline while also creating conditions for successful and high-quality professional learning opportunities for both teachers who are new to the field and those who have a

wealth of classroom experience to share (Learning Forward, 2022).

A PARTNERSHIP FOR EQUITY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Through a series of collaborative design sessions, CalEPIC helped districts and educator preparation programs strengthen their teacher residency partnerships and enhance learning experiences for their teacher candidates, veteran teachers, and students.

The partnership between the Corona-Norco Unified School District in Riverside County, California, and the teacher education program at Claremont Graduate University is a prime example of this work. It started with a shared interest in examining teacher vacancy and assignment data, as many of the state tools for this purpose are regularly delayed by a year or more (Lambert, 2024).

Reviewing and reflecting on these data led the district and university to recruit candidates for recurrent or expected future vacancies and select intentional placements for teacher candidates that would not only support their pedagogical practice, but also their introduction to school systems and professional growth over their residency experience.

In addition, the district and university explored how to leverage the residencies to meet a key district goal: addressing a variety of student learning gaps with more targeted, data-driven instruction.

In perhaps the most innovative aspect of this residency design, the district and university worked together to reimagine a residency structure that could meet students' needs.

Together, they restructured the residency model to center equity. In the model, residents work for 20 hours each week throughout the year in a co-teaching capacity alongside their mentor teachers. They are also employed by the district on a part-time basis to provide tutoring and academic interventions as needed.

Most notably, the Corona-Norco district reallocated district and school-site funds to compensate residents for their work as tutors or interventionists. Because the residents were familiar with the students and the curriculum, they transitioned smoothly into the intervention work, boosting the sense of belonging and buy-in among participants.

Residents have attested to how this change not only heightened their interest in the teaching pathway, but made it financially possible for them to pursue their credentials and ultimately become teachers.

HOW EXPERIENCED TEACHERS BENEFIT

While teacher residency programs were originally conceived to better prepare new teachers for the rigors of the classroom, ample research affirms they offer opportunities for professional growth to mentor teachers as well (Goldhaber et al., 2020). This was an area we looked at closely in our work to better understand how residencies could serve an even wider array of needs within schools.

To acknowledge their important work, expertise, and insights as experienced educators, Claremont Graduate University compensates the mentors and provides them with regular professional learning and networking opportunities to connect with other educators serving in similar roles.

Mentors discuss ways to deepen relationship-building and antiracist practices in their own classrooms, learn critical coaching skills such as how to give and receive feedback, and address other areas of professional learning aligned with their and the district's continuous improvement goals.

This is a big benefit for everyone involved because previously those professional learning goals were often overlooked in lieu of training on new curriculum or technology, implemented as a one-size-fits-all experience.

Based on our observations during regular visits to each campus, interviews

with teachers and administrators, and periodic surveys, we found that mentoring functioned as effective, job-embedded professional learning for veteran teachers. Educators told us it helped build their capacity in ways that aligned with their experience in the field and their nuanced needs as learners.

Many of the mentors we interviewed emphasized that they felt more reflective in their roles as a result of participating. This was tied to moments of thinking aloud alongside their residents about specific teacher moves and pivots within the context of actual instruction.

One mentor described how conversations with her resident involved more frequent cycles of evaluation and adjustment of her instructional practices to better meet their students' needs. Another said how much she valued the opportunity to "continually collaborate and bounce ideas off each other, sharing insight and desired outcomes as we teach, lesson plan, calendar, and design assessments."

Mentors also noted that they engaged often with their residents in laughter and venting when a lesson did not go as planned — an important outlet made possible by the mentor-resident relationship. In discussions with our educator preparation program and district teams, there was consensus that these moments supported teachers' learning and mental health in deeply humanizing ways.

Mentoring also enhanced the impact of teachers' other professional learning opportunities, particularly the implementation of new instructional practices. This hinged on two elements unique to residencies: the immersive nature of the experience and the yearlong opportunities for learning between resident and mentor within an authentic classroom setting.

One mentor told of instances when she tried out a new strategy or activity inspired by discussions with her resident. Another described how working through her resident's

questions about a new curriculum helped her understand it and teach the lessons much better than did the single, overwhelming day of training provided at the start of the school year. She reflected on the multiple opportunities to think through the curriculum alongside another practitioner and the feeling of safety in the space for her to be more vulnerable in her own learning.

Principals all agreed their teachers displayed greater flexibility when working to differentiate instruction and act on variations in assessment data because they had someone to help them manage the logistics.

This dynamic is particularly important for experienced teachers who tend to have fewer interactions with their site instructional leaders, often because they are regarded as less in need than those newer to the field. Developing sustainable systems that create such spaces for reflection and practitioner-to-practitioner feedback helps strengthen teachers' capacity to collaborate and lead other educators in the future.

Many districts are now exploring teacher compensation models that value such mentoring contributions over graduate degrees on their salary scales, especially as research has found little correspondence between advanced degrees and teacher effectiveness (Robles, 2024).

BRIDGING NEEDS AND INNOVATION

Strategic residency models act as a bridge for strengthening learning and collaboration across components of the education ecosystem that have traditionally operated separately. This has helped move them from a traditional transactional relationship to one in which partners are invested in each other's mutual success, sustainability, and innovation.

The Corona-Norco Unified School District and Claremont Graduate University partnership shows how this can lead to concrete progress toward more equitable outcomes for all learners

with a more diverse workforce and refinement of both new and veteran educators' instructional practices.

The challenges our schools and our schools of education face in the years ahead cannot be tackled effectively in isolation. It's imperative to find ways districts and educator preparation programs can cross over to work on initiatives that affect them both.

Redesigning teacher residencies together creates an important thoroughfare between districts and educator preparation programs for data-driven conversation, innovative approaches to budget allocation, and improvements to programs and educator professional learning.

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Debra Russell is a transformation specialist at the California Educator Preparation Innovation Collaborative. Meghan Cosier is a professor and executive director at the Thompson Policy Institute on Disability at Chapman University. Rebecca Hatkoff is director of teacher education at Claremont Graduate University. ■

Teaming up to improve literacy in Tennessee:
Q&A with Sharon Roberts and Courtney Bell

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

The Learning Forward publications team often wants to follow up on the current state of all the inspiring, system-changing work we've encountered through the stories told in this magazine. When we heard about the recent work of the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), it was the perfect opportunity to get an update on one of its latest initiatives that reflects the partnership theme of this issue.

In her 2020 article in *The Learning Professional*, Sharon Roberts, now senior advisor to SCORE, described an innovative network of districts across Tennessee that worked with SCORE to reshape early literacy instruction and improve students' reading skills.

Through this network, named Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT), district and school leaders, curriculum supervisors, and instructional coaches learned to use state-approved, high-quality curriculum and to facilitate professional learning for their teachers that was ongoing, embedded, and aligned to the curriculum and the state's literacy goals. Their results were impressive for students (see box on p. 33).

We spoke recently with Roberts and Courtney Bell, SCORE's vice president of research & innovation, to learn more about their current areas of focus that broaden the impact of this literacy work across the teacher pipeline.

How has SCORE's focus changed from working solely with districts to supporting partnerships between universities and K-12?

Roberts: The LIFT network started with six districts and ended with 20. Over the course of eight years, we developed a clear vision for what changes needed to happen at the state level. The 2021 Tennessee Literacy Success Act had all the components we had learned through that body of work, and we were very supportive as an organization in making sure those components were included. This included rigorous training for

teachers, requiring districts to purchase high-quality instructional materials for English language arts, and revising the literacy standards for educator preparation programs, among other things. We advocated strongly for the passage of the bill during the special session in which it was presented.

One of the things we try to do at SCORE is incubate new and innovative ideas and, from that, generate proof points that we can encourage and advocate for taking to scale. With the passage of the Literacy Success Act, we felt like our next iteration of work was really to focus on the partnerships between K-12 and educator preparation programs.

Bell: Since the Literacy Success Act aligned with what districts in the network had already been doing through their work with LIFT — adopting and using high-quality instructional materials, providing professional learning to educators, and

leveraging systematic foundational skills instruction — we heard from districts that they felt good about current teachers' understanding of what needs to happen to teach kids how to read.

However, they are constantly getting this new stream of educators who many felt were not coming into their districts with the literacy training they needed to be successful. Districts felt they were having to retrain all their new hires, whether they were brand-new teachers or coming in from another state.

How did your organization reimagine teacher preparation?

Bell: We became interested in bringing together educator preparation programs and K-12 districts to align on a vision to make the transition from preservice to the first years in the classroom easier and ease the burden

on both ends. We started convening a Lead in Literacy network with four educator preparation programs, including the two largest in our state that prepare the greatest number of teachers, and we paired them with K-12 districts, many of whom had been in our LIFT network.

As a state, we've seen that our early career educators leave the classrooms at alarming rates — about 20% of teachers are leaving within their first three years. Our hypothesis was that they were feeling confused between what they learned in their preparation programs and what they were being asked to do once they were hired by a district. There was an opportunity to align what absolutely has to be mastered before students enter the classroom.

We wondered if instead of teacher preparation being just four years of undergraduate work, it could be reimagined to consider the four years of preservice and the first three years of teaching as a cohesive seven-year arc. We then looked at what things the district would be willing to take on and it made the most sense to stay at the educator preparation program level.

Seven years of teacher support sounds pretty revolutionary. To achieve this, what were some shifts made by districts and teacher prep programs?

Bell: In Tennessee, it's kind of interesting because we have an educator preparation report card, so educator preparation programs are held accountable for the percentage of teachers who stay in the classroom. They have an incentive to try to make sure that teacher candidates are really well-prepared.

That being said, we ask so much of our educator preparation programs. They have to prepare candidates in classroom management and teach how to deal with students with behavior issues and how to teach students with disabilities and English language learners. They're teaching culturally responsive teaching and deep content

With the passage of the Literacy Success Act, we felt like our next iteration of work was really to focus on the partnerships between K-12 and educator preparation programs.

knowledge and have so many standards to align to, including state standards, specific literacy standards, and some programs that go through dyslexia certification. There's a lot that they're beholden to and many expectations for all of these different things to cover.

We heard from teacher candidates that they don't really need a whole undergraduate class on classroom management because that's something that's kind of hard to understand in the abstract — until you have your own classroom. Many of our district partners have robust support for first-year teachers around classroom management, so that felt like something they could take on to free up some time for the educator prep programs to focus on other things. That's one example, but as we convened as a network that included both preparation program faculty and K-12 district staff, they were each able to better understand how they were supporting and preparing candidates and where that could be streamlined.

In Tennessee, it is legislatively required for districts to provide teachers with high-quality instructional materials for English language arts. Districts felt comfortable providing curriculum-specific training and support for teachers once they were hired, but they really wanted preparation programs to help candidates be discerning consumers of curriculum. How do you teach a candidate that being given high-quality materials doesn't mean you don't have to plan, it means you spend your time doing deep intellectual preparation and planning for differentiation rather than

sourcing materials and writing lesson plans? That's a mindset shift.

How do districts and educator preparation programs align on teaching pedagogy and curriculum delivery?

Bell: In Tennessee, every district is required to adopt and purchase high-quality instructional materials. The state selects these through a curriculum adoption process. They put out a list about every six years, and a handful of those materials are used pretty widely.

A kind of aha moment for us was when we heard a little bit of pushback from some folks in higher ed around high-quality instructional materials. Some had the feeling that those materials were scripted or took away freedom from educators. We reframed things a bit to say that if you are preparing teachers to write out a unit and lessons, you're actually not preparing them for what they will be asked to do in a Tennessee classroom. That's going to be confusing and frustrating for them.

All Tennessee teachers are given high-quality instructional materials, and what they will be asked to do is really intellectual preparation. It's a totally different set of skills and structures to prepare student differentiation. They will bring their expertise and their art to how they're teaching. Where are the areas, based on what the teacher knows about the students, in which kids may struggle, how do you provide support for multilingual learners, and so forth?

Another thing we've learned is some of the structures that we take for granted in K-12 don't naturally exist in higher ed. As part of this network, we're specifically focused on students with learning and thinking differences — multilingual learners and students with disabilities — and how they're accessing literacy instruction.

For these convenings on the educator preparation side, the team is faculty from the multilingual learner department, the students with disabilities department, and the literacy

department. We found that those folks rarely have the opportunity to get together and collaborate.

We also found that there was almost never an opportunity for the multilingual learner K-12 teacher to connect with the faculty preparing the (incoming) student teachers. It cuts both ways. The district supervisor of multilingual learners needs to be up on the research that the faculty member may be leading. But then, how do you get the faculty member to get into classrooms with that teacher and see what it looks like on the ground?

In K-12, we have professional learning communities, and, in a best-case scenario, that group includes folks vertically and horizontally, not just the classroom teacher, but all educators talk about what students need. For some of the higher ed faculty, it was really the first time they were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder to talk about what they were teaching to candidates. That was a huge aha for us.

How does the network create consistency for new teachers in lesson preparation and delivery?

Bell: Together, as a network, we have all of the faculty and the staff from the educator preparation programs and the K-12 districts sit down and go through lesson preparation. They go through an intellectual preparation protocol for the lesson, then observe it using another tool, and debrief it. The process shows what our candidates are asked to do when they're in their clinical experience and then when they're ultimately teachers. We're getting everyone familiar with this set of common tools used in our state.

Here is a tangible example of how this improves teacher candidates' learning experiences. After our first network meeting, one of the professors took her students through a lesson preparation protocol the next week to demonstrate that, if you're handed high-quality instructional materials, it is not enough to skim through your

lesson the night before and simply read it verbatim the next day. You are going through it with a fine-toothed comb to figure out what is the meat of the lesson, the thing that you want the students to take away.

The fact that we were at a K-12 school, looking at their materials with K-12 educators, and then seeing it in action makes it more real for the faculty members. The faculty members who are experts in their content areas were able to provide rich and robust feedback to the K-12 partners who were walking classrooms with them.

What are some of the key aspects of developing a network like yours?

Bell: The key thing is bringing everybody to the table. I think if you just talked to K-12 districts, you would hear that ed prep is not preparing teachers, they're not doing what we need them to do, and they're not connected to classrooms. And then if you talk to ed prep, they're saying we're not able to do our job because we're held to all these different standards and requirements, we don't have the materials, and we're not able to leverage our intellectual freedom.

My advice would be to ground the work in actual classrooms rather than talking about it abstractly. Make those connections between the district and the education preparation providers.

What recommendations do you have for other states or districts that want to follow suit?

Roberts: When we first started, we had lots of conversations for a year or more before we actually got into the work. We knew the K-12 space really well, and we'd worked with districts closely for a number of years, so we knew the challenges they were having, both locally and at the state level. But we knew we didn't know everything we needed to know about higher ed, how they train teachers, and that kind of thing. We tried to go into it

very humbly by learning and asking questions and building relationships.

We believe that leadership matters. One of the first things that we did, which was amazing, was to engage the university deans, starting at the top, even though many of them often don't have a literacy background. We found that worked at the district level, too, to involve the superintendent or whoever is leading and guiding this work. We've always talked about the vertical spine, from top leadership all the way down to classroom level, and how everybody's in alignment.

We invited the deans to go with us into schools to see what a lesson looks like and what kids are doing. They were amazed at the level of rigor that the children could handle in those early grades. Let the people who are doing the work — the teachers, the principals, the supervisors — all talk about it and engage with each other.

Bell: One thing that our ed prep programs have said is no matter what we do with the rest of this network, please make sure that at least once a semester we are actually in K-12 classrooms together.

Roberts: Tennessee has had partnership agreements between educator preparation programs and school districts for eons, but they were mostly on paper. The beauty is that since those relationships have formed, they're really working together now. It's about bringing people together to have all of those rich conversations so that we're all moving in the same direction.

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Jefna M. Cohen is associate editor of *The Learning Professional.* ■

School-university partnerships foster lasting change in Mississippi

BY MANUELITO BIAG, DENISE A. SOARES, DAVID ROCK, BRADLEY ROBERSON, AND MARY BRAMLETT

When a dedicated teacher returns from a professional learning session brimming with new ideas and strategies, their enthusiasm can quickly fade if they don't have the support and resources needed to implement these ideas.

Professional learning in isolation often leads to frustration and missed opportunities. As outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) and the U.S. Department of Education's definition of high-quality professional development (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), professional learning

must be sustained over time to lead to changes in educators' practices.

Building bridges among education stakeholders, such as districts, universities, and community partners, is an important but underused strategy for creating professional learning that is both sustainable and impactful. Intentional bridge building can

Be problem-focused and user-centered

Attend to variability

6 CORE PRINCIPLES OF IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE

Organize the networks

See the system

Learn through disciplined inquiry

Embrace measurement
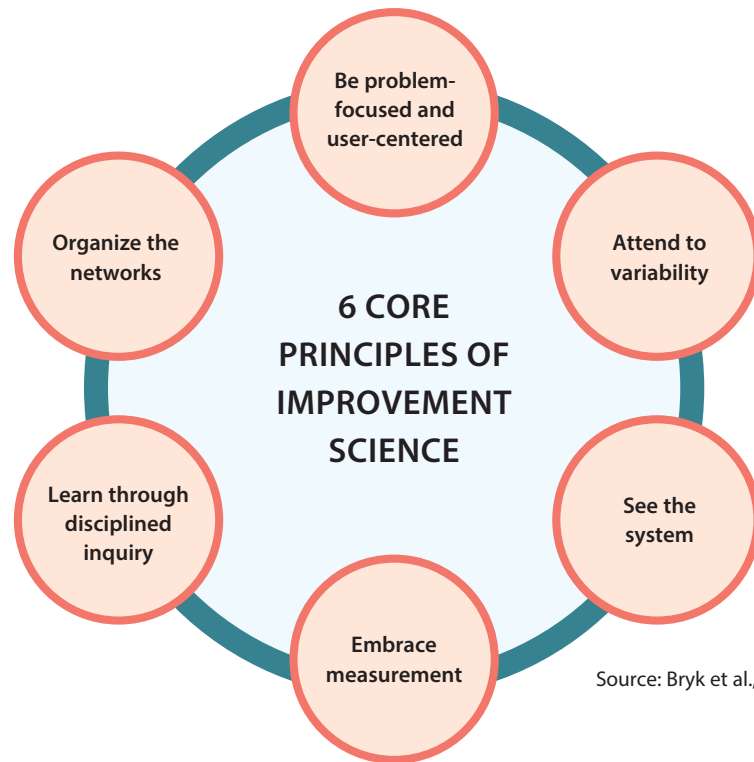
Source: Bryk et al., 2015.

transform professional learning from a series of disconnected experiences into a continuous, collaborative effort supported by diverse perspectives and resources. Working together, stakeholders can fill gaps in expertise and capacity, such as personnel, time, and funding, and build a culture in which professional learning is seen as a shared responsibility.

The National Center for School-University Partnerships, headquartered at the University of Mississippi, has embraced improvement science as a core strategy in its bridge-building work. Improvement science provides a structured, evidence-based approach to solving problems of practice and achieving sustainable improvements. This article outlines how the center applies improvement science principles to build sustainable professional learning partnerships and shares examples of this work in action.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF IMPROVEMENT

The center's approach to professional learning is grounded in the six core principles of improvement, adopted from the work of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Bryk et al., 2015).

Make the work problem-specific and user-centered. Professional learning begins by anchoring efforts around specific problems of practice that educators face daily, ensuring that initiatives are relevant and context-sensitive to their needs. For example, the center collaborates with educators to identify shared challenges, such as enhancing learning outcomes among students living with disabilities, as focal points for improvement.

Variation in performance is the core problem to address. Professional learning strategies must account for local variations to be effective across

diverse settings. The center emphasizes using root cause analysis tools such as cause-and-effect diagrams to uncover why performance differs across schools or classrooms, ensuring that solutions address local conditions rather than applying one-size-fits-all fixes. By focusing on the specific needs and challenges of each context, the center creates professional learning experiences that are more likely to succeed and sustain.

See the system that produces the current outcomes. Improvement science emphasizes understanding the systems that drive current outcomes. By mapping processes and engaging stakeholders at all levels, the center ensures that professional learning initiatives address underlying issues rather than symptoms, creating pathways to long-term, systemic change.

We cannot improve at scale what

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

The National Center for School-University Partnerships fosters a collaborative and inclusive community that empowers educators, leaders, and institutions to advance equity, access, and high-quality learning experiences for all students.

We pursue five strategic priorities: build partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure equitable education, strengthen educational improvement leadership through robust training and career development, establish collaborative scientific learning communities to address shared challenges, advance an improvement-oriented research agenda, and identify and elevate exemplary improvement models and practices in education.

Through these efforts, we aim to create lasting impact and drive continuous improvement in schools and school systems.

we cannot measure. Measurement is central to improvement. The center uses real-time data collection to track the impact of professional learning efforts and adjust strategies based on evidence. Ongoing assessment allows for adjustments to be made as needed, ensuring that professional learning remains effective and impactful.

Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. The center builds professional learning through plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles to ensure that improvements are based on evidence. PDSA cycles are a structured, iterative process for testing and refining changes. They involve planning a change, implementing it on a small scale, studying the results, and acting on what is learned to inform the next cycle. This practice fosters a culture of disciplined experimentation, where educators continuously refine their approaches.

Accelerate improvements through networked communities.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of improvement science. The center facilitates networked communities, educators and administrators can share insights, learn from each other, and scale successful practices across different contexts. This approach accelerates improvement and ensures that successful practices are shared and adopted widely.

These principles provide a framework for the center's initiatives, ensuring that professional learning is actionable, flexible, and designed for real-world impact.

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

One example of the center's work is the partnership between the University of Mississippi and the Oxford School District in Mississippi. This collaboration exemplifies the power of bridge building in fostering sustainable professional learning.

The partnership began with a problem-specific focus: reducing

chronic absenteeism. By engaging families and seeing the system behind absenteeism, university student teachers worked with families to improve communication and engagement. This effort led to measurable declines in absenteeism rates among elementary and high school students.

Building on this success, the partnership expanded to professional learning initiatives, focused on anchoring practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. For instance, the Oxford Early Childhood Center leveraged improvement science principles to enhance reading outcomes for 4-year-old students.

The administration tested a change idea: empowering teacher assistants to provide instructional support through structured, small-group lessons. Initially implemented in two classrooms, the approach demonstrated significant improvements in reading outcomes and has since been scaled districtwide.

Breakthrough Collaborative Structure (1 Year)

NCSUP

Training and onboarding

Disseminate learning (e.g., change package)

ACTION PERIOD — ACTION PERIOD — ACTION PERIOD — ACTION PERIOD

Act / Plan / Study / Do
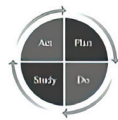
IN-PERSON CONVENING | ONLINE CONVENING | ONLINE CONVENING | ONLINE CONVENING | IN-PERSON CONVENING

This partnership highlights how collaborative networks and iterative testing foster shared ownership of professional learning, align efforts across stakeholders, and produce sustainable results.

SCALING SUCCESS THROUGH NETWORKED COMMUNITIES

The center also facilitates a collaborative learning model that brings together multiple stakeholders to tackle systemic challenges. Established by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (2003), the Breakthrough Series collaborative model applies improvement science principles through PDSA cycles, action periods, and regular coaching calls.

For example, one collaborative that focused on chronic absenteeism co-constructed a theory of improvement anchored in five drivers: creating a positive learning environment, enhancing family engagement, implementing early warning data systems, providing targeted interventions, and strengthening community partnerships.

This theory addresses absenteeism as a systemic issue, emphasizing the principle to see the system that produces the current outcomes rather than attributing it solely to individual student behavior. Guided by these drivers, districts tested change ideas through PDSA cycles. By measuring improvement in attendance rates and refining strategies collaboratively, the districts achieved measurable success in reducing absenteeism.

A range of evidence-based actions supported each driver. These included developing chronic absenteeism protocols, using historical and current attendance data to identify trends, and emphasizing attendance incentives during holiday breaks. These actions reflect the importance of addressing variation in performance across schools and tailoring interventions to their unique contexts.

For instance, two districts tested and implemented distinct strategies, demonstrating the principle to anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. One district focused on creating chronic absenteeism teams at each school site. These teams analyzed attendance data to identify students at risk and designed targeted interventions, such as personalized outreach to families of students with six or more absences.

The district also established consistent communication channels between schools and families to proactively address barriers to attendance. By simplifying protocols to align with school-site contexts and using quarterly data collection cycles, the district ensured interventions were both manageable and effective. Their structured, data-driven approach fostered collaboration and shared routines, contributing to notable improvements in students' attendance.

Meanwhile, another district

emphasized individualized goal setting and community engagement to address absenteeism. Teachers and staff worked closely with students to set attendance goals and provided regular support through adult-student mentorship.

This district also emphasized communication with families, using proactive messaging to reinforce the importance of attendance and ensure support was available for overcoming barriers. By aligning interventions with data insights, the district was able to create targeted solutions that matched the specific needs of their students.

The collaborative efforts among these districts highlight the importance of accelerating improvements through networked communities as they shared insights and supported one another throughout the process. This mutual learning environment fostered the refinement of strategies and encouraged innovation, enabling districts to scale successful practices and achieve meaningful reductions in chronic absenteeism.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Building bridges in professional learning is about more than creating connections. It's about fostering collaboration, aligning efforts, and creating sustainable support networks that drive meaningful improvements in education. By focusing on specific problems of practice, addressing variation in performance, and understanding the systems that produce current outcomes, we can ensure that professional learning efforts are targeted and effective.

With a commitment to measuring progress, engaging in disciplined inquiry through iterative cycles, and leveraging networked communities, the National Center for School-University Partnerships demonstrates how improvement science can transform professional learning into a powerful force for lasting change.

We invite education leaders to join us in applying these principles to build bridges within their own contexts. By identifying key stakeholders, fostering collaborative groups, and aligning professional learning efforts across systems, we can collectively enhance professional learning and improve outcomes for educators and students alike.

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Manuelito Biag is an improvement advisor and Denise A. Soares is interim director of the National Center for School-University Partnerships. David Rock is dean of the School of Education at the University of Mississippi. Bradley Roberson is superintendent of Oxford School District in Oxford, Mississippi. Mary Bramlett is an academic counselor at the University of Mississippi and program manager for the Bridge Program and the National Center for School-University Partnerships. ■

IDEAS

TEACHER COLLABORATION BENEFITS MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

The BELLA (Bridging English Language Learning and Academics) professional learning program aims to enhance teachers' practices and accelerate multilingual learners' language and literacy growth by bringing together ESL and grade-level teachers in a yearlong, job-embedded professional learning experience. Multiple rigorous randomized controlled trials show that the program is accomplishing those goals and leading to increased student learning. See the article on p. 46.

Professional learning and development that honors students' identities

BY ANDY HARGREAVES AND DENNIS SHIRLEY

Who are you? It's a simple enough question, but pose it to anyone, and you'll get fascinating responses. "My hair is my identity," one high school student told us. "I'm a gamer," said another. Others assert their identities as Swifties, goths, or athletes. Throw in race, gender, nationality, and religion, and we soon see how gloriously complicated human identities can be.

As educators, we squander huge opportunities for inclusion when valuable discussions about identities are oversimplified and hijacked for partisan purposes. But this is just what has been happening.

Legislators in 18 U.S. states have passed laws restricting the teaching of race and gender, arguing that these are inherently divisive topics that pit groups against one another. A RAND Corporation report (Woo et al., 2024) observes that even in the 32 U.S. states that have not passed such laws, most educators say they avoid lessons referring to race or gender because they are "afraid of verbal or physical altercations with parents."

Identity talk need not degenerate into culture wars, however. In fact, if you ask people to describe three aspects of their identity — as we regularly do in our classes, workshops, and in everyday conversations — you quickly learn that everyone loves to talk about

their identities once they are offered the opportunity.

By stimulating such conversations, professional learning and development can help all of us to understand better who we really are and how we can belong to something bigger than ourselves.

Learning about identity calls on us to go beyond aspects of professional learning that are generally acknowledged as key to quality and effectiveness, such as the embedded, student-focused, and collaborative nature of learning. Those aspects are necessary but not sufficient to address the central role that identities play in schools.

An additional aspect of such learning is acknowledgment of

complexity because identities are multifaceted and wonderfully unique. Too often, when identities are addressed through implementing culturally responsive teaching or anti-bias training, for example, there is a tendency to take a simplistic approach that puts people into specific, discrete categories.

The reality is that most of our students and their teachers have multiple, complex, and even contradictory identities. This matters greatly because it's hard for young people to succeed or be well if they feel they need to hide significant parts of themselves because their identities are stigmatized for being different or stereotyped to fit into a program or a category.

So, the urgent question is this: Can our schools help our students flourish in the fullness of their identities? We believe the answer is yes — if education professionals can get beyond categorizing people because of one characteristic that supposedly supersedes all others, whether it be race, gender identity, privilege, disability, or something else. By acknowledging and embracing complexity, we can make

identity a vital foundation for inclusion, achievement, and equity in education.

With these considerations in mind, this article draws on two research programs — in collaboration with 10 school districts and with a national network of 41 schools attempting innovation for greater inclusion after COVID-19 — to examine the complexity of students' identities and what it means for rethinking professional learning and development.

THE FULLNESS OF IDENTITIES

Formulaic approaches to learning about identity categories, such as allocating a month for studying one kind of identity or affinity groups based on a single identity category, fail to address the complexity of people's identities.

Ten percent of all Americans currently identify as mixed-race, an experience that can bring both richness and a sense of not belonging to traditionally defined categories. Similarly, bisexual people sometimes feel they are between and beyond two worlds, not fully accepted by either gay or straight communities (Dodge et al., 2016).

People with mixed social class identities can feel a pull between their identities, too. For example, people with working-class origins who attend elite colleges sometimes feel torn between embracing their new attachments and abandoning their parents' working-class culture or remaining true to their roots while feeling ill-at-ease among the middle classes they have become part of (Lehmann, 2014). Yet few curriculum texts engage with and celebrate the intersection of multiple identities, even as they honor specific ethnic, cultural, gender-based, and neurodiverse groups.

What do complex identities mean for professional learning and development in schools? When it comes to treating our students fairly and fully, educators need to consider and carry out intentional moves that engage with young people's identities to improve outcomes for all of them.

THREE STRATEGIES

Let's look at three practical and inspiring approaches to professional learning and development that have arisen from our collaborative research with schools and fully embrace the

complexities of students' identities.

- **Whole school for the whole child:** Mobilize the whole school to engage the fullness of each whole child.
- **Essential for some, good for all:** Appreciate that what is essential for some students is often good for all students.
- **Self-determined learning:** Empower students to develop their own identities with self-determined learning.

Whole School for the Whole Child

Everything in life is interconnected. It's not just ecosystems, societies, and schools, but ourselves. We don't think, or feel, or act in isolation. We do all these things at once. Too often though, as Sean Slade argues in *The Power of the Whole* (2023), we categorize people into separate bits with tests, checklists, and curriculum units.

Since we know that most identities are multiple, not singular, we need to engage with our students in the fullness of who they are. This is far from easy. No teacher can know everything about everybody in their classes all at once. It's too much to ask. It takes a whole school to do this. Working as a whole team, in the everyday context of helping our students achieve, is the essence of high-quality professional learning and development.

In their research project in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, Andy and his colleague, Jess Whitley, listened to a vice principal describe how her school adopted a collaborative focus on the whole child in its efforts to be responsive to the school's African Nova Scotian students, one of the most marginalized populations in Canada.

"We looked at our 10 most vulnerable students," the vice principal, who is African Nova Scotian, said, including those who were African Nova Scotian, after the COVID-19 pandemic. School staff who knew these students then filled in a simple template they had created in a professional learning community (PLC) meeting that identified their challenges and what's working.

From there, they considered what else they could be doing. They checked whether support and interventions had been fully implemented or whether they needed to look at the child again through another lens, such as a trauma-informed lens, to understand them better.

This inquiry-based approach involved joint learning by diverse educators focused on equity and inclusion for students in the greatest immediate need. It entailed centering the student, as the vice principal put it, so that each educator understood "what they bring to the table, and then you're teaching around them" and the fullness of who they are.

This all-encompassing framework was not just focused on the data points that show up on tests, but instead on real kids with significant struggles and, importantly, on multiple aspects of their strengths and challenges. It enabled students to show not only what they know but, more importantly, who they are.

Essential for Some, Good for All

From the very beginning of Ontario's inclusion strategy in Canada in the early 2000s, educators asserted that what is essential for some is often good for all. This principle was not unlike that of the Universal Design for Learning framework that was pioneered in the U.S. to educate students with special needs. In Ontario, though, the principle was infused into PLCs in ways that applied to many other groups with diverse identities.

In our project studying change strategies in 10 Ontario school districts, we found that PLCs prepared educators to incorporate Indigenous traditions and pedagogies into classes that included significant numbers of Indigenous students. The strategies included learning in circles, land-based pedagogies, and a sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself along the lines of traditional "grandfather teachings." What was good for these students can be good for all students.

For example, a school in the post-COVID network that was focused on innovation and inclusion had no students who officially self-identified as Indigenous, but it used Indigenous design expertise to incorporate classroom furniture and learning areas in inclusive circles and ellipses rather than hierarchical rectangles and rows.

In many Indigenous cultures and communities, meeting in circles and ellipses means that no one has the seat of power at the head of the table, everyone can see everyone else, and sometimes talking sticks can be passed around so that the person who holds the stick gets to talk while everyone else listens. Everyone has their chance to hold the stick and contribute. It's a highly participative and inclusive use of space.

As another example, our research has identified schools and their PLCs that have taken steps to protect all students from bullying, not just the LGBTQ students who might have been the initially intended beneficiaries.

Similarly, while gender-neutral bathrooms can support transgender students, they can also turn school bathrooms into better places for everyone with more imaginative and modern designs that, for instance, make the areas outside the toilet stalls usable and visible to everyone (which prevents bullying) and ensure the stalls themselves are more private, as in many modern restaurants. These examples show that the idea of "essential for some, good for all" can build inclusion for students who have many different identities.

Self-Determined Learning

If you want to know a student's identity, who's the best person to ask? The student, of course. Instead of presuming things about our students and then planning lessons for them, we need to spend more time asking students themselves and using their

responses as a point of departure for teaching and learning together.

Michael Wehmeyer and Yong Zhao (2020) call this *self-determined learning* because it emphasizes autonomy and choice and supports students in activities that they value. Wehmeyer and Zhao say one reason for declining student engagement between the elementary years and the last years of high school is that beginning around 8th grade, student learning is often characterized by mandated curriculum and imposed assignments. Little choice for teachers means less engagement for students. Students can accomplish more when educators introduce more choice and self-determination with effective scaffolding and support.

After visiting an experimental high school, a principal in the post-COVID network introduced an innovation called The Genius Hour. For one hour a week, students in a small fishing and farming community could pursue their own passion project, then strive to become a "genius" in it.

One student made a solar panel that helped heat up her chicken coop after hatching chicks at school. Another used mathematics and the physics of sound to turn a recycled church pew into a guitar.

Teachers who were skeptical at first changed their minds when they realized what their students had accomplished. The students showed who they were and what they could do in ways that went far beyond teachers' prior knowledge of them.

A teacher in another school in the network experienced the same transformation. She had, by her own admission, been resistant to her school's proposed project to engage middle school students in a working-class town in growing, cooking, and distributing food in the community. She believed the students needed to concentrate all their energies on improving their literacy skills.

However, the skills involved in the food project are not only useful for real life but are traditionally valued skills among this working-class community. As we argue in our book *The Age of Identity: Who Do Our Kids Think They Are … and How Do We Help Them Belong?* (2024), being working class (which doesn't always mean low-income or poor) is an identity that often gets overlooked in schools. The food project provided an unusual opportunity connected to the students' working-class identity.

The teacher wasn't aware of this potential connection. She wanted to knuckle down and teach literacy in a more structured way. Her chief concerns were about relinquishing control to the students to lead their own learning. "When the kids are driving the bus and I don't know which direction we're going in, I can't plan ahead," she said.

But her principal kept pressing her to get involved. This was collaboration with hard conversations thrown in. Eventually, the teacher capitulated to please her principal. Then she discovered what her students were capable of doing. "If I had not seen the successes of the kids, I think I'd still be on that road to fear," she said.

THE MANY FACETS OF IDENTITY

Too often, we let identity issues polarize us in relation to young people's education. We treat intersecting identities as subtractions and sources of division rather than as additions or even multipliers of people's capabilities.

Instead, let's offer professional learning and development that promotes the idea that identities affect everyone, are intriguingly complicated, and are a key to inclusion and equity.

This means returning to the core principles of high-quality professional learning and development but with a more inclusive twist. All the examples we have described are embedded in innovative and inclusive practices designed to change learning for the better. All of them are collaborative efforts by inclusive teams focused on inclusive improvements.

And all of them concentrate not just on improving outcomes for student learning, but on building partnerships with diverse and gloriously complex whole students as part of the improvement process. But they are also explicit about the importance of identity.

If we recognize that we need the whole school to know the whole child, that what is essential for some students is often good for all of them, and that students can determine more of their own learning as authors of their own identities, then identity issues can uplift our students and liberate how we approach our own professional learning and development.

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Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley are research professors in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. ■

Multilingual students benefit when grade-level and specialist teachers collaborate

BY LESLIE M. BABINSKI, STEVEN J. AMENDUM, STEVEN E. KNOTEK, AND JENNIFER C. MANN

Most teachers in public schools (67.3%) will have at least one multilingual learner in their class, yet many have no preparation for supporting these students (NCES, 2022; Johnson & Wells, 2017). For example, less than half of teachers (47.9%) have taken a course on how to provide effective instruction for multilingual learners (NCES, 2022). Recognizing this gap, school district administrators have called for more professional learning about instructional strategies for students who are learning English and academic content simultaneously (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).

A promising approach is professional learning that provides opportunities for meaningful collaboration between grade-level classroom teachers and ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers. This can be especially impactful in the early

elementary grades because oral language and literacy development in these formative years are integrally connected (Cain, 2015).

Yet while ESL teachers are often better prepared to support multilingual students' oral language development, grade-level teachers are often better prepared to promote reading and writing. Creating opportunities for co-planning and aligning instruction can bridge that gap, but research on such collaborative learning efforts has been limited.

The BELLA (Bridging English Language Learning and Academics) professional learning program (**bellapd. org**) addresses this need. BELLA, which was developed and tested with support from the Institute of Education Sciences (Babinski et al., 2018; 2024a; 2024b) in collaboration with teachers and administrators, aims to enhance teachers' practices and accelerate multilingual learners' language and literacy growth by bringing together ESL and grade-level teachers in a yearlong, job-embedded professional learning experience. Multiple rigorous randomized controlled trials show that the program is accomplishing those goals and leading to increased student learning.

PROGRAM CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

BELLA is a hybrid professional learning program that includes online modules, in-person application and implementation co-planning, and virtual implementation coaching. It is grounded in research on effective professional learning (Desimone, 2009) and Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), including conditions for success, transformational processes, and rigorous content. ESL and K-2 classroom teachers participate together so they can bridge one another's expertise and instructional time to support the multilingual learners they share instructionally.

BELLA includes three key components to support teachers working with multilingual learners. First are evidence-based instructional strategies for literacy. BELLA is aligned with both decoding and language comprehension skills and is consistent with the IES Practice Guide for teaching academic content and literacy to multilingual learners (Baker et al., 2014).

BELLA instructional strategies support the concepts that strong oral language skills provide the foundation for literacy development (Snow & Matthews, 2016) and that the relationship between the two is reciprocal, with progress in one area supporting growth in the other.

The second component is teacher collaboration. Given the importance of integrating language development with academic content, meaningful collaboration between ESL and grade-level teachers can facilitate their students' learning. BELLA facilitates the development of shared language around instructional strategies and an asset-based framework for supporting multilingual learners.

ESL and grade-level teachers can intentionally co-plan to align both how and what they teach (Babinski et al., 2024a). For example, previous research shows that when multilingual learners see academic vocabulary front-loaded during their ESL instruction, they are more likely to engage with it during their grade-level literacy instruction (e.g., Baker et al., 2014). Collaborative professional learning gives teachers an opportunity to build such scaffolds.

The third key component of BELLA focuses on instructional design that embraces students' cultural assets

and uses their existing knowledge to facilitate new learning. This approach, grounded in Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, challenges deficit-oriented views by highlighting the strengths and knowledge that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring to the classroom.

By intentionally planning lessons to make connections to students' experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and languages, teachers in both ESL and grade-level classroom settings can build on students' strengths and enhance their learning.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

Rigorous research has demonstrated positive impacts of the BELLA professional learning program on teachers' instructional practices and multilingual learners' language and literacy growth.

In an initial randomized controlled trial, 45 teachers and 105 Latino multilingual learners in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grades from 12 elementary schools participated in the yearlong BELLA program (Babinski et al., 2018). At the end of the school year, teachers who participated in the program used more evidence-based instructional strategies, such as decoding strategies and strategies to support comprehension, for multilingual learners than those who didn't participate (Hedges' g = 2.02).

Furthermore, students whose teachers participated in the program showed higher growth compared to the control group on two subtests on the Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey-Revised Normative Update (Schrank et al., 2010): story recall [g = 0.29] and verbal analogies [g = 0.23]). These subtests measure students' oral language and the ability to reason using lexical knowledge.

A second randomized controlled trial (Babinski et al., 2024b) also found positive impacts. In a yearlong study with 39 K-1 teachers and 106 Latino multilingual learners from 13 schools in two districts, students

By intentionally planning lessons to make connections to students' experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and languages, teachers in both ESL and grade-level classroom settings can build on students' strengths and enhance their learning.

whose teachers were in the professional learning group experienced significantly greater growth (d = 0.30) in overall language and literacy skills (RIT score) as measured by the MAP Growth Reading K-2 assessment (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2019).

In addition, grade-level teachers in the professional learning group were more likely to intentionally collaborate with ESL teachers to plan for their multilingual learners than teachers in the comparison group (d = 1.40).

TEACHER INSIGHTS

Interviews with teachers who participated in BELLA illustrate the ways in which the professional learning program helped to enhance their instruction and support their collaboration with one another.

One theme teachers highlighted was the benefit of support for collaboration. Teachers described their collaboration as becoming more intentional, substantive, and efficient as a result of participating in the program.

One teacher said, "Before (BELLA), we didn't really collaborate. We'd see each other in the hall, and we'd say, 'How are (the multilingual students) doing?' And you might just talk about what (reading) level they're on. Now we're talking about specific skills and specific strategies."

Teachers also mentioned the culture of community they gained through collaboration and the sense

of being part of a team effort. One teacher described the collaboration as "two people working toward the same goal, a feeling of sharing responsibilities. So it took the burden off my shoulder and her shoulder that you're not … (the) only one working toward the growth of the children."

Another said, "It has made me closer to the (other teachers). I feel more supported by them. I feel like I'm working with a team now."

A third theme from teachers was the role of implementation coaching. It provided time for reflection, intentional planning, and support and encouragement. One teacher explained how the coach helped her apply what she learned about instructional scaffolds to everyday teaching practices, saying that the coach "was crucial for (implementation) because the workshops are wonderful, but you get back into the classroom and you can't remember what you've learned and you're trying to pull out the notebook. She helped put all the pieces together."

SEEING IMPROVEMENTS FOR STUDENTS

Interviews with teachers also highlighted how they thought the program led to improved student outcomes.

One ESL teacher said that her students felt more confident because they knew she was working with the general education teacher: "I've noticed a big change this year in their confidence," she said, because the students recognized "that I knew what they were doing in their (grade-level) classroom (and that) I was communicating with their (classroom) teacher."

A 1st-grade teacher pointed out how students benefited from her increased understanding of what her students needed to be successful. She said, "They don't have a problem making connections; they had a problem accessing vocabulary. Once I unlocked that, it was like, 'I

understand how to teach you now.' You need the vocabulary support to equal the playing field here."

These kinds of reflections are an important part of teachers' professional learning as well as a window into how the BELLA professional learning program achieved success. As district leaders prioritize the educational needs of their multilingual learners with evidence-based professional learning such as the BELLA program, we encourage them to continue tapping into teachers' insights and evaluating students' progress to understand the impacts of teacher professional learning programs.

The results of our research suggest that meaningful collaboration and reflection among grade-level and ESL teachers can enhance instruction and, most importantly, multilingual learners' development of both language and literacy.

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Leslie M. Babinski is a research professor at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy and co-founder of FigStar Learning. Steven J. Amendum is a professor and director of the School of Education at the University of Delaware and co-founder of FigStar Learning. Steven E. Knotek is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Jennifer C. Mann is a research scientist at the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy. ■

6 questions to include in a satisfaction survey

BY JO LEIN AND JENNIFER GRIPADO

When we ask professional learning leaders to gauge the impact of a learning experience, they often say something like, "It went well!" However, this general summary does not provide the kind of specific information decision-makers need to determine whether to continue, expand, adapt, or abandon professional learning approaches. To get that kind of information, we need to turn to evaluation.

There are many valuable sources of evaluation data, including — but not limited to — professional learning participants. In our work on leadership development and organizational learning for Tulsa Public Schools in Oklahoma, we regularly ask educators to share feedback and perceptions of usefulness of their professional learning. The data they provide can inform continuous improvement efforts by illuminating where educators feel the learning opportunities are strong and where they need to be improved. They also provide a means of accountability, by giving decision-makers information to assess whether educators feel the time, effort, and resources invested in professional learning are meaningful

6 INDICATORS OF PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION

This participant satisfaction survey uses a six-point Likert scale to get a precise analysis and determine actionable insights.

Relevance: The session supported my development in my current or future role.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Connection and voice: The session allowed me to connect with my colleagues and share my voice.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Facilitation: The session was facilitated well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Promotion: I would recommend this session to other people (in similar roles).	1	2	3	4	5	6
Time prioritization: This session was worth my time away from my other duties.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Application: I anticipate being able to apply what I learned to support my school's goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6

and likely to lead to improvements in educator practice and student learning (Breslow & Brock, 2020).

We have chosen to use six consistent indicators of satisfaction and perceptions of quality so that we can effectively analyze the strategies that work and compare across professional learning strategies and experiences.

SIX CONSISTENT SURVEY ITEMS

Based primarily on Malcolm Knowles' (1962) theory of andragogy, our participant surveys focus on relevance, connection and voice, facilitation, application, promotion, and time prioritization.

1. Relevance

Relevance addresses the fundamental question: How pertinent is the learning session to an educator's current or future role? When educators see their learning as relevant to their current challenges and goals, they are more likely to use their learning to change practices and therefore have a positive impact on student learning (Learning Forward, 2014). When educators find the content directly applicable to their role, it fosters a sense of purpose and motivation.

2. Connection and voice

The ability to connect with colleagues and share one's voice is paramount in the learning process. Studies by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning emphasize the significance of active learning and collective participation in effective professional learning (Hammond, 2005). Collaboration not only enhances the learning experience but also strengthens the professional community within the educational institution. Evaluating the level of connection and voice in a learning experience helps leaders determine whether professional learning is creating a supportive environment where educators feel heard, valued, and motivated to actively participate.

3. Facilitation

A well-facilitated session can transform complex topics into easily digestible knowledge. A University of Southern California study indicates that effective facilitation techniques enhance self-learning and assessment, making the session more impactful for educators (Brenneman, 2021). Skilled facilitation ensures that learning is structured, engaging, and conducive

to meaningful dialogue. By evaluating participants' perceptions of the quality of facilitation, educators can provide valuable feedback to organizers and facilitators for continuous improvement.

4. Promotion

When educators find a learning experience valuable, they often become advocates, spreading the knowledge gained to their peers. Evaluating whether participants would recommend a learning experience to others helps capture participants' feelings about quality and their likelihood of sharing what they learned. Positive recommendations are indicative of the learning experience's impact and relevance and the likelihood that it will contribute to a culture of knowledge sharing and continuous improvement.

5. Time prioritization

Teachers have demanding schedules, making their time valuable. Effective learning experiences respect educators' time by providing focused content and meaningful activities. When educators feel that a session was worth their time away from other duties, it indicates their perceptions of

the session's efficiency and relevance (Torgerson, 2021). Professional learning designers and facilitators often find that this category of satisfaction can be the toughest on which to achieve positive results.

6. Application

The ultimate goal of professional learning is to translate knowledge and skills gained into practical applications within the classroom. Evaluating participants' intentions and plans to apply the acquired knowledge in support of the school's goals is a valuable step in understanding impact (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2017). This indicator illuminates whether participants feel empowered and motivated to make tangible changes in their teaching methods that should lead to student outcomes. It is not as conclusive as evaluating changes in practice directly, but it can help to determine whether the logic model of the learning experience is supported or, if not, where the chain of effect breaks down.

THE POWER OF A SIX-POINT LIKERT SCALE

Using a six-point Likert scale for evaluation provides a nuanced understanding of participants' satisfaction levels. In our work, we find that having six response options allows for a precise analysis and enough granularity to determine actionable insights without the potential respondent frustration and decreased response rate that often comes from the seven-point scale recommended by some researchers (Thompson, 2022). We also like the fact that the six-point scale has an equal number of positive and negative responses and eliminates the neutral or middle option on many five-point surveys, which can give survey takers an easy out, creating a temptation to breeze through the survey without much thought.

The example on p. 51 shows the six-point Likert scale items we use to assess the six indicators of participant satisfaction.

SCALING AND ITERATING DESIGN

We keep the survey items consistent year after year so that we can compare, contrast, and synthesize across multiple professional learning experiences. For example, from looking at the data, our leadership development team learned that a certain type of professional learning we refer to as field experiences, which includes in-classroom observation practice, received higher ratings for novice and aspiring school leaders compared to traditional professional development sessions, even if those sessions included practice.

Based on those high ratings, we developed professional learning growth communities, field-based experiences that occur in small groups focused on a specific content area. Now, all school leaders, regardless of their level of tenure, participate in practice-based learning to build curricular knowledge and instructional coaching capacity. The survey insights from the novice leaders revealed what worked to refine and scale.

The survey results thus far have shown the power of iterative design based on data. Compared to other sessions for school leaders, professional development growth communities receive higher results in both the "relevance" and "application" indicators.

NUANCED INSIGHTS

In the ever-evolving realm of education, continuous professional learning stands as the cornerstone of growth, not just for educators but also for the students they guide. But that learning needs to be relevant, meaningful, and high quality. Satisfaction surveys help us get beyond the generic notion of whether professional learning went well and delve into the depth that is essential to making progress in today's educational landscape. With nuanced insights into participant perceptions and consistent measures that we use in all of our professional learning, we can pave the way for impactful, engaging, and

transformative learning experiences. This can help us empower both educators and students for a brighter future.

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Jo Lein is a leadership development coach and Jennifer Gripado is the assistant superintendent of organizational learning for Tulsa Public Schools in Oklahoma. ■

TOOLS

LEVELS OF USE TOOL FOR NAVIGATING CHANGE

Implementing a new educational innovation can be tricky, but there are tools to navigate it. In our August issue, we introduced the three dimensions of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) to help leaders effectively manage an innovation change, such as a new curriculum adoption. In a continuation of that work, we offer the Levels of Use tool and an additional questionnaire on the following pages.

How well is change progressing in your school or system?

BY LEARNING FORWARD

After carefully vetting and selecting a new curriculum, a school district rolls it out enthusiastically, hoping it will improve students' math scores. District leaders dedicate time and effort to the professional learning to support the program. Yet despite planning for these changes and investing in teachers' knowledge of the curriculum, what happens in each classroom varies widely.

Some teachers skip the professional learning sessions and never look at the materials. Some incorporate a few of the curriculum components but struggle with the pacing, so they don't get through the lessons fully. Others diligently attempt to keep up with the pacing guide, but without pausing to thoroughly reflect on how it's going, there's no way to know if students are mastering the content.

"No one would expect improvement under those conditions, but time after time, organizations will seek to assess the effectiveness of an innovation without ever examining how it is being used," wrote Shirley Hord in *Taking Charge of Change* (Hord et al., 2006). Before leaders have gained a firm grasp on an innovation's use throughout the district or system, they often de-emphasize it or replace it because they aren't seeing the outcomes they anticipated.

How, then, can leaders assess who is applying the innovation, how, how often, and whether they are modifying it? How could the principal of the school described above get a pulse on how teachers throughout the school are or are not adopting the curriculum?

The Levels of Use tool on the following pages fills that gap. Drawn from the Concerns-Based Adoption Model for managing change (Hall et al., 2006), it helps leaders and change facilitators understand where participating educators are along the implementation continuum, ranging from nonuse to full classroom integration and beyond.

With this tool, leaders can be better equipped to guide their teams toward successful implementation, whether the change is a new curriculum, improved instructional practice, or another innovation.

REFERENCES

Hall, G.E., Dirksen, D.J., & George, A.A. (2006). *Measuring implementation in schools: Levels of Use.* SEDL.

Hord, S.M., Rutherford, W.L., Huling, L., & Hall, G.E. (2006). *Taking charge of change.* SEDL.

Source: AIR, 2015.
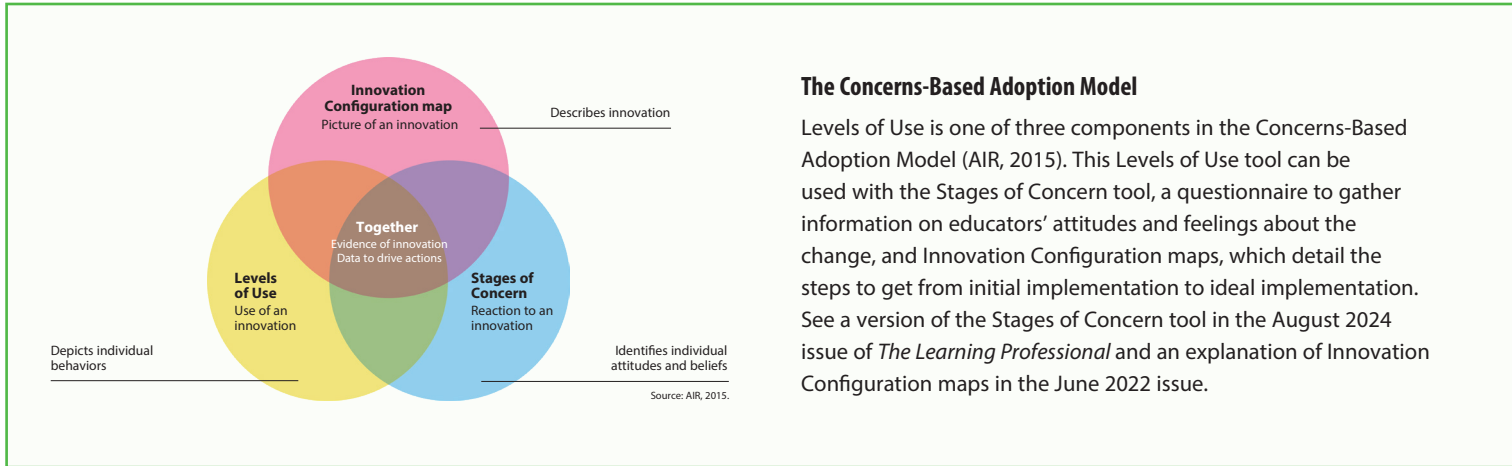
The Concerns-Based Adoption Model

Levels of Use is one of three components in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (AIR, 2015). This Levels of Use tool can be used with the Stages of Concern tool, a questionnaire to gather information on educators' attitudes and feelings about the change, and Innovation Configuration maps, which detail the steps to get from initial implementation to ideal implementation. See a version of the Stages of Concern tool in the August 2024 issue of *The Learning Professional* and an explanation of Innovation Configuration maps in the June 2022 issue.

IDENTIFY HOW EDUCATORS ARE IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Use this tool to understand where an individual is along the continuum of use of a new curriculum, initiative, or change. The column on the left of the table below and on the following page describes eight levels of use and the middle column provides a statement that is characteristic of someone who is at that level of use. The column on the right provides a space to check the level of change that applies to the educator you are working with. Under each level is a decision point, which individuals need to make to take steps toward the next level of use.

To determine an educator's level of use, you can use the interview questions that follow the table along with your observations of the educator, if applicable.

Note that this tool is not intended to be used for evaluation or assessment but for developing a holistic understanding of an educator's current status to inform next steps and support for implementing change.

Level of Use	Characteristic statement	✔
Level 0: Nonuse The user has little or no innovation knowledge or interest and is taking no action.	"I've heard about it, but, honestly, I have too many other things to do right now."	
Decision point A: Explores the innovation and what it requires of students and educators.		
Level 1: Orientation The user takes the initiative to learn more about the innovation.	"I'm looking at the materials and am considering using it sometime in the future."	
Decision point B: Establishes a time to begin using the innovation.		
		continued on next page

TOOLS

IDENTIFY HOW EDUCATORS ARE IMPLEMENTING CHANGE *continued*

Level of Use	Characteristic statement	✔
Level 2: Preparation The user has plans to begin using the innovation.	"I've attended professional learning, and I've set aside time every week for studying the materials."	
Decision point C: Makes educator-oriented changes (as opposed to student-oriented ones).		
Level 3: Mechanical The user makes changes to better organize the innovation with little time for reflection.	"Most of my time is spent organizing materials and keeping things going as smoothly as possible every day."	
Decision point D1: Establishes a routine pattern of use.		
Level 4A: Routine The user makes few or no innovation changes and has an established pattern of use.	"This year, it has worked out beautifully. I'm sure there will be a few changes next year, but basically I will use it the same way I did this year."	
Decision point D2: Changes the innovation to increase student outcomes based on formal or informal evaluation.		
Level 4B: Refinement The user makes changes to the innovation to increase student outcomes.	"I recently developed a more detailed assessment instrument to gain more specific information from students to see where I need to change my use of the innovation."	
Decision point E: Initiates innovation changes based on colleague input and coordination.		
Level 5: Integration The user makes deliberate efforts to coordinate with others in using the innovation.	"Not everyone has all the skills needed to use the program to have the greatest impact on student learning. I've been working with another teacher for two years, and recently a third teacher began working with us."	
Decision point F: Begins exploring alternatives or major modifications to the innovation presently in use.		
Level 6: Renewal The user re-evaluates the quality of their use of the innovation and seeks more effective alternatives to its established use.	"I am still interested in the program and using it with modifications. Frankly, I'm reading, talking, and even doing a little research to see whether some other approach might be better for the students."	
Adapted from Hall et al., 2006, and Hord et al., 2006.		

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR DETERMINING LEVEL OF USE

Ask the educator you're working with the following questions in the order they appear. When you reach a "no" response, probe further on that question and then mark the educator's level of use as indicated below. When you get a "yes" response, continue to the next question. When you have marked a level of use, move to the reflection questions below.

Are you using the (curriculum, innovation, or other change strategy)?	
No: Select Level 0, 1, or 2	Yes: Continue to the next question
If not, do you plan to use it and have you set a start date? Are you currently looking for information about it?	
No: Select Level 0 or 1	Yes: Continue to the next question
If you are using it, are you making any changes to it, and if so, what kind?	
No: Select Level 3 or 4A	Yes: Continue to the next question
Are you coordinating your use of the innovation with colleagues or other users internal or external to our system?	
No: Select Level 4B or 6	Yes: Continue to the next question
Are you planning on exploring major modifications?	
No: Select Level 4B or 5	Yes: Select Level 6
Adapted from Hall et al., 2006.	

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

After talking with the individual and checking off the appropriate level of use, consider these questions to determine your next steps in supporting change implementation.

| What is the educator's current level of use of the new curriculum, initiative, or change?	
How will you support the educator to move to the next level of use? The decision points, or needed action steps, between each level can give you ideas of the kind of support the educator needs.	

REFERENCE

AIR. (2015, December 8). *CBAM: The Concerns-Based Adoption Model.* air.org/resource/cbam-concerns-based-adoption-model ◼

[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.
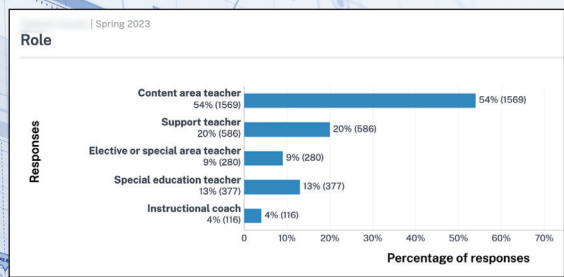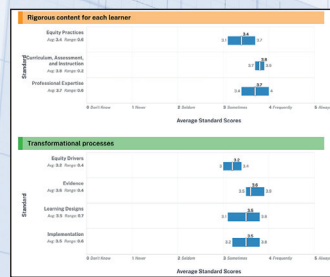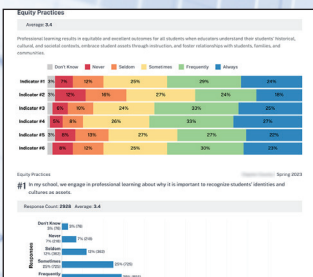
THE STANDARDS ASSESSMENT INVENTORY:

- 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**.

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THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION
STANDARDS ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

NETWORK SCHOOLS SEE INCREASE IN MATH SCORES

A new report about Learning Forward's Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Network shows that student math scores in a set of Maryland classrooms have significantly improved, thanks to a transformative approach to educator professional learning. The results are striking: In classrooms where teachers did a collaborative deep dive into high-quality curriculum, students increased their proficiency scores on district tests from an average of 9% to 52% in just one marking period. Read the report at **bit.ly/3OU9Fas**
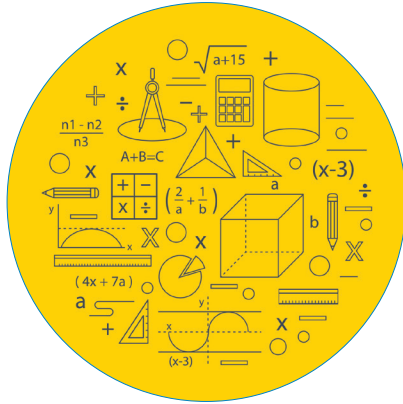
CALIFORNIA AND TEXAS NETWORKS FOCUS ON MIDDLE SCHOOL MATH INSTRUCTION

Learning Forward will launch a middle school math improvement network in California and Texas with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The network's goals are to increase equitable student outcomes and positively affect the teaching and learning of middle school mathematics using curriculum-based professional learning. Outcomes will be measured by teacher surveys, classroom observations, and summative student data.

The 48-month grant aims to improve the capacity of district professional learning staff to use data to develop comprehensive curriculum-based professional learning support and increase the understanding of and spread the use of curriculum-based professional learning nationally. The grant will also contribute to improving school and district systems for high-quality curriculum-aligned professional learning.

The collaboration with regional agencies in California and Texas will enable intrastate network models for sharing relevant change ideas and discussing spread and scale mechanisms. Learning Forward's well-established continuous improvement strategies will help ensure a comprehensive approach to problem-solving that is collaborative, inquiry-based, and fueled by cycles of rapid learning and improvement.

Learning Forward will also use the four-year grant period to elevate the importance of curriculum-based professional learning within the larger Learning Forward membership through publications, annual symposia, and Learning Forward Annual Conference sessions that highlight key Gates Foundation grantees.

Learning Forward believes that if teachers receive relevant, meaningful, and ongoing support to use selected high-quality curriculum materials, their instruction will improve to meet the needs of their students. This will lead to an increase in Algebra 1 proficiency, positive math mindsets, and more students moving into high-level math classes.

This network will build on lessons from other similar projects, including the Curriculum-Based Professional Learning Networks that Learning Forward supports. The current network includes multiple stakeholders from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Nashville, Tennessee; and Montgomery County, Maryland, who network throughout the year.

To learn more about curriculum-based professional learning and Learning Forward's network, see the October 2024 issue of *The Learning Professional*.

Learning Forward expands its leadership in education improvement

Learning Forward is playing a leadership role in the establishment of the National Coalition for Improvement in Education. Learning Forward's participation is an extension of our dedication to continuous improvement in teaching, leading, and learning that makes a difference for educators and students, said Michelle Bowman, Learning Forward's senior vice president of networks & continuous improvement.

"Continuous improvement is a high-impact design for educator professional learning and an effective form of data gathering," Bowman said. "We are thrilled to partner with colleagues who collectively are dedicated to building the field around evidence-backed strategies of highly effective learning systems and educator learning teams."

The coalition, which is organized by and housed at the High Tech High Graduate School of Education in San Diego, California, was inspired by the long-running Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Summit on Improvement in Education. Beginning in 2026, the coalition will take responsibility for hosting the summit.

In addition, the coalition will help set strategic priorities for the field on education practice, research, and advocacy for continuous improvement in academic, education, and policy contexts. "Working together, we can achieve greater impact and help equip education systems to achieve ambitious goals for students and educators alike," Bowman said.

To learn more, visit **learningforward.org/2024/10/22/learning-forward-is-expanding-its-national-leadership-in-the-educational-improvement-field/**

Guide will outline how to use Title IIA funds to close the digital divide

Learning Forward will work with the State Educational Technology Directors Association and ISTE+ASCD to develop a guide on using Title IIA funds to close the digital design divide, the gap in educators' access to professional learning that builds capacities to design learning experiences enabled by technology. The project is funded by a grant from Google.org.

Title IIA funds, authorized at $2.3 billion under the Every Student Succeeds Act, have long supported educators with professional learning and instructional coaching opportunities. However, recent data from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that only nine states prioritize these funds for technology training, while fewer than 40% of districts use them to advance professional learning in technology.

With schools facing growing questions about how to incorporate technology ethically, responsibly, and helpfully, the new resource will provide actionable guidance to state and local education leaders on how to deploy Title IIA funds to close the digital design divide as articulated in the U.S. Department of Education's 2024 National Educational Technology Plan.

The guide will include:
- Research on current Title IIA investments and technology-focused professional learning
- Strategies for effectively using Title IIA funds to close the digital design divide
- Case studies showcasing successful implementations of Title IIA funded activities
- A road map for collaboration among states, districts, and key stakeholders

THE LEARNING FORWARD ADVOCACY TEAM (A-TEAM) IS BACK

People and policies at the federal level are undergoing change, and Learning Forward is your trusted source for education policy information and updates. We invite you to sign up for the Learning Forward A-Team to get regular updates on Title IIA as well as other education-related policies and news that affects schools, districts, and states.

As an A-Team member, you will be invited to monthly 30-minute federal policy update Zoom calls and receive timely email updates. In addition, our advocacy team is also on standby to answer your questions to provide counsel for policy questions you might have about your own local policy arena.

Join us today at **learningforward.org/advocacy/sign-up/**

CALL FOR PROPOSALS for 2025 Annual Conference

Learning Forward is accepting proposals for the 2025 Annual Conference, to be held Dec. 7-10, 2025, in Boston, Massachusetts.

The 2025 Annual Conference theme is Bridging Professional Learning & Student Success, focusing on documenting the link between meaningful, rigorous, and engaging learning experiences and improved results for adults and students.

Learning Forward's Annual Conference is the only conference focused exclusively on how to plan, implement, and measure high-quality professional learning that changes educator practice and improves results for all students. It brings together thought leaders, experts, researchers, and other practitioners to collaboratively share the latest learning, knowledge, and techniques. Our conference models deep learning and best practices so you can take them back to lead learning in your schools, districts, or systems.

Submit your proposal to: **bit.ly/4fDfpAP**

Proposal deadline is 11:59 p.m. Eastern time on Thursday, Jan. 30, 2025.

UPDATES

JOIN THE LEARNING FORWARD ACADEMY CLASS OF 2027 AND APPLY FOR A SCHOLARSHIP

The Learning Forward Academy is accepting applications for the next cohort. This 2½-year deep learning experience increases educators' and leaders' capacity to improve teaching and learning to benefit those who need it most — students.

Joining colleagues from around the world, academy participants dive deep into a problem of practice relevant to each educator's context. Participants align this to current research-based evidence and practice on critical topics for educators, including the Standards for Professional Learning, continuous improvement processes, leadership, and advocacy.

The academy includes five in-person learning sessions totaling 10 days and continues with four virtual learning events, registration for three of Learning Forward's Annual Conferences, and Learning Forward membership for three years.

Applications are due March 17, 2025. For information and the application, visit **learningforward.org/academy**

Scholarships are available from the Learning Forward Foundation, which supports the development of learning leaders. Scholarships cover the cost of academy tuition, and some include a travel stipend. Available scholarships include:

- Learning Forward Foundation Scholarship for a School- or District-Based Education Leader
- Patsy Hochman Memorial Scholarship for a School- or District-Based Professional Learning Leader (includes $500 travel stipend for each of five academy sessions)
- Stephanie Hirsh Academy Scholarship (includes a $500 travel stipend for each of five academy sessions)
- Sybil Yastrow Academy Scholarship (includes a $500 travel stipend for each of five academy sessions)

Applicants may apply for more than one scholarship if they meet the requirements. Scholarship applications are also due March 17, 2025.

Learn more at **foundation.learningforward.org**

#TheLearningPro
FEATURED SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

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

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	2	Mailed in-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 (include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)		
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	4	Paid distribution by other classes of mail through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail®)	217	150
c. Total paid distribution [Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4)]			4196	4043
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	2	Free or nominal rate in-county copies included on PS Form 3541		
	3	Free or nominal rate copies mailed at other classes through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail®)		
	4	Free or nominal rate distribution outside the mail (Carriers or other means)	150	150
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i. Percent paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)			97%	96%
16. **Electronic copy circulation**			Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months	No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
a. Paid electronic copies			15,285	15,599
b. Total paid print copies (line 15c) + paid electronic copies (line 16a)			19,481	15,599
c. Total print distribution (line 15f) + paid electronic copies (line 16a)			19,631	19,792
d. Percent paid (both print and electronic copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100)			99%	99%
☒ I certify that 50% of all my distributed copies (electronic and print) are paid above a nominal price.				
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18. **Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager, or owner.** Suzanne Bouffard, publisher, Learning Forward			Date: Sept. 30, 2024	

Write for us! 2025 *The Learning Professional* themes:
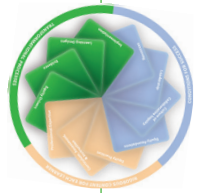
- **February:** *Learning designs*
- **April:** *Navigating new roles*
- **June:** *Measuring learning*
- **August:** *Professional learning resources*
- **October:** *Learning communities for leaders*
- **December:** *Meeting the needs of today's learners*

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

THROUGH THE LENS

OF LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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.

Learning Designs: Well-designed professional learning considers multiple factors, including scope, duration, and structures. Utah's statewide coaching initiative addresses those factors with layers of support and partnerships among stakeholders.

Article: "A coaching endorsement program blossoms in Utah," p. 22

Consider: What requirements are in place to become an instructional coach in your context, and how are they working? If there isn't an established process, what would you like to put in place?

Your reflections:

Equity Foundations: Teacher preparation programs that are accessible and sustainable for candidates from all backgrounds are a step toward equity for educators and students. Paid teacher residences in California are leading to a more diverse teaching pool.

Article: "A more equitable model for teacher residencies," p. 28

Consider: How does your system recruit and support new teachers? How could partnering with other community institutions broaden access and sustainability for historically underrepresented teacher candidates?

Your reflections:
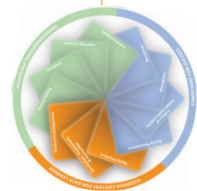
Professional Expertise: Education leaders can improve instruction and student outcomes by applying research-based methods of inquiry and reflection. Members of the National Center for School-University Partnerships see success by grounding their work in six principles of improvement science.

Article: "School-university partnerships foster lasting change in Mississippi," p. 36

Consider: How do you ensure that professional learning in your system addresses a specific, timely problem faced by educators and students? How could you use inquiry and a reflection process to make it more focused and practical?
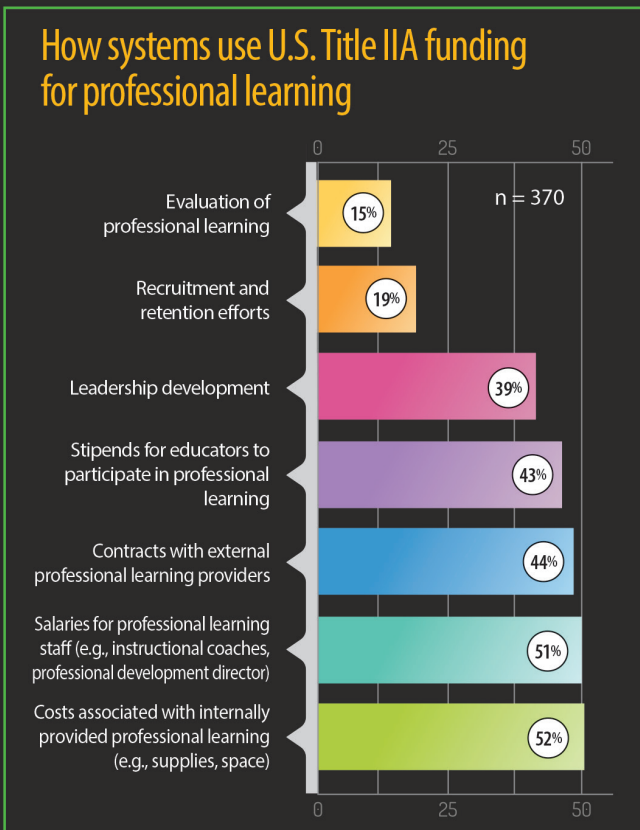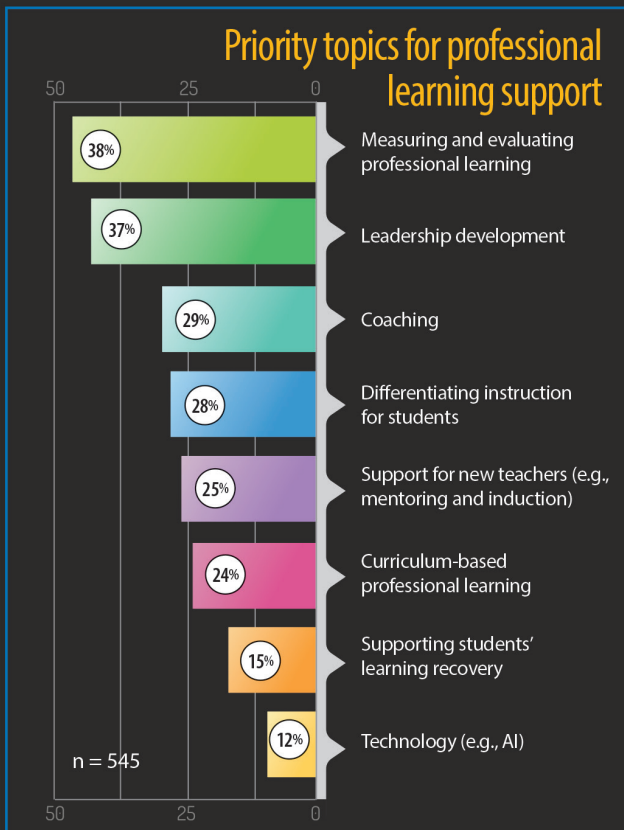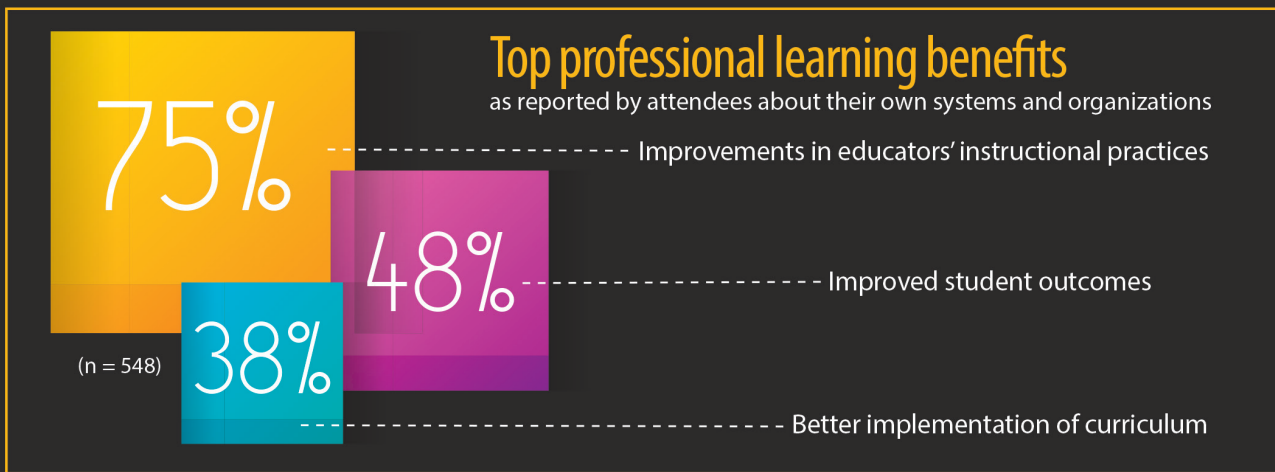
Your reflections:

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

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRIORITIES & PAYOFFS

During the 2024 Learning Forward Annual Conference, we asked attendees to share their professional learning successes and needs. The responses from over 500 educators paint a picture of robust educator learning focused on student success.

Top professional learning benefits
as reported by attendees about their own systems and organizations

75% - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Improvements in educators' instructional practices

48% - - - - - - - - - - - Improved student outcomes

38% - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Better implementation of curriculum

(n = 548)

Priority topics for professional learning support

Topic	%
Measuring and evaluating professional learning	38%
Leadership development	37%
Coaching	29%
Differentiating instruction for students	28%
Support for new teachers (e.g., mentoring and induction)	25%
Curriculum-based professional learning	24%
Supporting students' learning recovery	15%
Technology (e.g., AI)	12%

n = 545

How systems use U.S. Title IIA funding for professional learning

Topic	%
Evaluation of professional learning	15%
Recruitment and retention efforts	19%
Leadership development	39%
Stipends for educators to participate in professional learning	43%
Contracts with external professional learning providers	44%
Salaries for professional learning staff (e.g., instructional coaches, professional development director)	51%
Costs associated with internally provided professional learning (e.g., supplies, space)	52%

n = 370

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% because respondents could choose multiple responses.

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