

support teachers to implement new initiatives. Because of this collaboration, a teacher-learning support structure emerged so teachers could not only learn the changes for the upcoming year, but also become part of the culture as an ongoing structure for teacher professional learning.

As expected, the teachers received their “Welcome Back” letter from the district in July. In the letter, they were notified about a new math textbook, changes in teacher evaluation, and the new short-cycle and state assessment systems. Fortunately, they already had a plan, so every teacher had time and opportunity to learn how to promote student achievement within in the context of the new teacher evaluations. Cathryn points out, “It’s not going to be easy this year—there are so many new things.” However, Bernadette adds, “We are ready. There’s one hour each week for grade-level teams to meet to analyze data and plan. Then there’s time for the professional Learning Design Cycles. We’ve got a support system in place.”

Krista sums up that the plan is tied to our teacher evaluation, and teachers will have choices as to what they will learn, and how it will take place.

What was their plan, and how did they design their schools for ongoing, meaningful professional learning?

## **WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOLS?**

Professional learning opportunities among school-based educators are very diverse. There exists a broad range in schools spanning from the highest quality of planned professional learning down to absolutely no opportunity for educators to grow and learn professionally.

What is known about professional learning at school sites, and how important is it for increasing student achievement? *Professional development* is defined as a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement. It is “conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders” (Learning Forward, 2012). The *Standards for Professional Learning* outline “the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results” (Learning Forward, 2012). Teachers learn collaboratively, with purpose, to improve their knowledge and skills resulting in high-quality support for all students’ achievement.

When teachers engage in job-embedded professional development, they learn what practices increase student achievement. What does this actually look like in a school? How can this happen in a busy school today?

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During a typical school year, where and how are teachers learning, when are they learning, what are they doing and learning, and how well are they learning?

##### **Where and how are teachers learning?**

Teachers may be sitting together in a room outside their classrooms, either in their professional learning communities (PLCs) or in collaborative learning teams that meet during school. They also may be learning together inside a classroom, sharing the implementation of a lesson designed together, or engaged in whole-faculty study.

You might see teachers “linked-in” to virtual learning networks or blogs, or watching videos modeling formative assessment strategies. There may or may not be a system in place to support teachers to ensure transfer of learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

##### **When are teachers learning?**

One vision is that teachers learn organically, and seamlessly, every day. As a teacher, you would consistently hear and participate in conversations rich with ways to support students. Realistically, what you see are teachers choosing to meet for thirty minutes to one hour at weekly or biweekly intervals during the school day. An alternative to this may include professional development sessions held during half-day early release days. On the other hand, perhaps it is more convenient after school or on a designated day without students, either before school starts or during the school year.

##### **What are teachers doing and learning?**

Teachers may be looking at student work to assess understanding of standards, designing a lesson that increases students’ engagement, or studying formative assessment practices to elicit student understanding of content and process. In some cases, teachers are asked to learn the new curriculum, analyze data, learn the new assessment system, better understand the new teacher evaluation system, or learn new security procedures. The content of what teachers learn may or may not be intentionally or directly related to improving teacher effectiveness or connected to student learning. The content may be about managing and better understanding state mandates and organizational functioning, or analyzing data from a continuous improvement cycle.

### **How well are teachers learning?**

A monitoring system may or may not be in place. If professional learning is evaluated for impact, multiple data sources are used, which may include teacher and student reflections, interviews, and teacher evaluation observations correlated to student scores. If a monitoring system is nonexistent, there will be no indicators of the impact of teacher learning.

### **What is actually happening with professional learning in schools?**

What follows is a look into six schools, which either already have or do not have ongoing professional learning as formally defined. What are the different enactments of professional learning at these schools? After reading the descriptions, can you guess which schools are intentionally designed for professional learning that is meaningful for teachers and will result in gains in student achievement?

**School A—High School.** All departments meet weekly. The math department at this high school is led by a strong department chair. The chair organizes, plans, and facilitates weekly one-hour meetings with seven math teachers. The content of the meetings is determined by the chair, who spends time before the meeting soliciting teacher input into relevant issues for discussion. Data from benchmark assessments, short-cycle student assessments, and test scores are used at each meeting to make instructional decisions and determine intervention supports for students. The principal asks that the math department keep records of their meetings to document the team's learning over time. The principal attends ten minutes of a meeting at least once a month to show support and interest for the teachers' learning. Math teachers also participate in the FPP for professional learning (see Chapter 2), and engage in a minimum of two cycles per school year of their chosen professional learning design. The department chair states,

The purpose of our work is to collaborate and learn together. To study something together and try it in a classroom setting, reflect, and share learning with one another and contribute to a professional learning knowledge base. Our professional learning model provides documentation for Domain 4 ["Professionalism" development domain on the state teacher evaluation] for participating in a PLC and providing learning and leadership opportunities for teachers.

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**School B—High School.** The math department meets monthly after school to discuss testing, pacing, and student passing and failure rates, and to hear schoolwide organizational announcements. The department chair plans and facilitates each meeting. The principal requires department meetings and rarely attends meetings unless there is a problem or last-minute announcement. Teachers have not been required to attend district-level professional development trainings off campus in the last ten years. The district experienced an economic shortfall and has had no money to provide professional development sessions or send teachers to conferences. One teacher states, “I would like to learn more. We do not have the time or money.”

**School C—Middle School.** All teachers are required to attend department meetings twice per month during the hours of 8:00 am to 8:20 am. The instructional coach is “in charge” of all meetings, meaning that he sets the agenda without input from other teachers, identifies topics for discussion, and directs all meetings. The principal attends the first part of the meeting on average once per month to give teachers announcements that he says are “important and timely information.” At one meeting, the principal “took over” and used fifteen of the twenty minutes allotted for the meeting to emphasize his points and share district information about using short-cycle assessment data effectively. The instructional coach did not have an opportunity to share several planned agenda items. Every year, teachers attend three days of professional development outside the classroom chosen by district-level administrators. There is no input from teachers as to the nature of the training. One teacher states, “We just go through the motions and do what we are told.”

**School D—Middle School.** All teachers meet weekly in PLCs by course (language arts, social studies, math, etc.) for fifty-five minutes. At the beginning of the school year before students arrived, the whole school staff studied PLCs to understand the “nuts and bolts.” This included how to start a PLC, facilitate the meetings, deal with conflict, set norms, track learning, use data, and decide on content to talk about during the meeting time. By the end of the year, four out of six teams were operating as a PLC as measured on a rubric with five indicators (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010):

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility
- Reflective professional inquiry
- Collaboration
- Individual and group learning

The principal checked in with the whole school staff in January to assess successes and challenges with learning in a PLC and attended each PLC meeting for at least five minutes once per month. PLC time was not used for management and sharing organizational information. Teachers regularly used data to drill down to student needs and decide what teachers needed to learn to improve student performance. During one nine-week grading period, the math PLC collected data from students and teachers about their perceptions of teaching and learning. Every week, the students and teachers rated the same five indicators, and this continuous feedback greatly helped to illuminate which teaching methods made students feel successful. For example, one student said, “Learning targets helped me know what the lesson was about,” and another commented, “My teacher listened and valued my opinion.” Teachers analyzed the data and compared their perceptions with those of students. The results revealed that there was often a discrepancy between the teacher and student perceptions. Teachers frequently rated themselves differently than their students rated them. The data helped teachers align behaviors and instructional actions to better support students. As one teacher in this PLC commented, “We work and learn well as a team. We’ve learned what students need and how we can change to support them.”

**School E—Elementary.** Teachers in this school have no time to meet collaboratively during the school day, but the district allocates six early release days per year for district-level planned professional development. Teachers attend compliantly or “get written up” for not attending. What teachers learn during the six days may or may not be directly related to their own or their students’ needs. A group of district-level administrators and instructional coaches make decisions about the content of the professional development based on their perceptions of teachers’ needs, such as information on the state teacher evaluation system, how to use the new curriculum resources, and how to use the short-cycle assessment system. Teachers learned in August that their short-cycle assessment data would be factored into their final teacher evaluation score, and that they “should study the short cycle ‘red zones’”—the places where students score the lowest—and provide extra support during the school day. Teachers leave the sessions with more questions than answers. According to the state standards, students are supposed to master certain concepts and skills by the end of the year. How can students be expected to score proficiently on assessment items that they have not yet learned? One teacher asked, “What am I supposed to pay attention to—the short-cycle data that effects my teacher evaluation, the state standards, or what the textbook says?”

**School F—Elementary.** Teachers in this school have a supportive principal who, with the help of teacher leaders at each grade level and the

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instructional coach, designed the school for professional learning by putting two structures in place.

Structure 1: Grade-level collaborative teams meet weekly for fifty minutes to study data and individual students, and suggest ways to intervene and support student needs.

Structure 2: The FPP for professional learning (see Chapter 2) where teachers choose a learning design based on their specific interests and learning needs, and engage in at least two cycles of the design using the three-part cycle—plan, teach, and assess/reflect.

At this school, teachers' attitudes about professional learning are positive. The instructional coach states,

Teachers are very excited at the results they are getting and continue to get in their math lessons. This strategy comes in handy in third grade with the multiplication unit. Teachers continue to use this method with story problems and have found it very useful in students' explanations of their answers. We began this semester with a new learning design focused on reading. Teachers loved the video lesson design so much and found it very powerful to see the strategies in action that we are continuing to use it. Our focus is on discourse and close reading.

Did you recognize which schools are and are not intentionally designed for supporting teachers' professional learning? Can you predict which schools are and are not showing gains in student achievement? At which schools do you think teachers find their professional learning meaningful, that is, having an important quality and purpose?

### **WHO IS MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, AND WHAT IS BEING DECIDED?**

The goal is to support teachers in improving professional practices through active engagement in meaningful learning activities. Educators who decide the type, content, and structure for teachers' professional learning are typically people other than classroom teachers, such as district-level administrators (assistant superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, professional development director, or coordinator), principals, and instructional coaches. Administrators base decisions on a variety of factors, which include what teachers need to know about new initiatives, state mandates, new and existing district policies, and availability of