

Vision of a learning system

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Our school district has embraced a vision and mission for professional learning.

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Our school district has adopted a formal definition of professional learning.

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Our school district leaders align their advocacy and practice to the district vision, mission, and definition of professional learning.

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Every educator in our district engages in effective professional learning every day so that every student achieves.

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Professional learning in our schools occurs primarily within learning communities committed to continuous improvement.

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Despite the fact that learning is schools' core business, school districts are not naturally inclined to be learning organizations. For school districts to remain viable entities, they need to be flexible enough to respond and adapt to the rapidly changing conditions around them. Districts must “learn” quickly while simultaneously encouraging principals, school-based teams, and individual classroom teachers to shift their practices. Districts must develop procedures and practices that thoughtfully incorporate changes, such as career- and college-ready student standards, ever-developing technologies, and revised federal guidelines. School districts must see themselves as “learning systems.”

Learning systems

- Value adult learning as much as student learning;
- Align their practices to student learning outcomes;
- Have a collective commitment to continuous improvement of people and processes throughout the organization;
- Thrive on precise feedback;
- Provide conditions that scale and sustain effective teaching and leading;
- Are committed to innovating; and
- Celebrate and honor success.

The concept of schools as learning organizations is not new. For decades, researchers including Shirley Hord, Learning Forward's scholar laureate, and Susan Loucks-Horsley, former executive director of Biological Sciences and Curriculum Study, studied learning organizations and described their attributes to guide research and application in schools.

Reports are clear about what academically successful learning systems look like and act like.

Learning systems require

- Collegial and facilitative participation of the superintendent and principal, who share leadership—and thus, power and authority—through engaging staff in decision making, problem solving, and designing the work of learning together;
- A shared vision that is developed from unswerving staff commitment to student learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work;
- Collective learning among staff, and application of that learning to solutions that address student needs; and
- The visitation and review of each school and teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement.

(Hord, 1997)

This body of work, along with findings in the field of professional learning and student achievement, contributed to Learning Forward's shift from viewing professional development as a set of workshops or disjointed activities to defining professional learning as the key strategy for increasing organization and educator effectiveness in order to improve student outcomes. The shift in definition has prompted educators to think more deeply about systemic change, the role of learning communities, and the responsibility of district and school leaders to ensure that learning occurs every day for both students and educators. Learning Forward's positions on, definition of, and Standards for Professional Learning help districts and school leaders link professional learning to increasing the effectiveness of adults in the organization in order to accelerate and deepen student learning.

Professional learning today calls for long-term, sustained focus on embedding the practice

of learning into the system so that those who have the greatest impact on student learning are continuously developing precision in their work to produce better outcomes for all.

Learning systems do not occur without strong district leadership. In a learning system, the central office is a place where trust exists across departments. District leaders partner with school leaders rather than trying to control them. Because adult learning is valued throughout the district, learning communities are the norm in the central office and in schools. Professional learning systems are in place, and resources are allocated to support them. Those who work at the district level are not simply part of the background noise related to school improvement, but exercise essential leadership—in partnership with school leaders—to build capacity throughout the district for high-quality teaching and learning (Honig & Copland, 2008, 2011).

Leverage a new vision

Robert Fritz (1989) proposes that structures are powerful forces for preserving the status quo and preventing systemic change; however, he suggests that it is not impossible to free ourselves from the pull of traditional structures.

To release from traditional structures requires a morally compelling vision, ruthless assessment of reality, and two or three powerful strategies. A learning system vision for professional learning focuses on its dual moral obligations to educators and students. Learning system leaders ensure that all educators have the knowledge and skills they need to teach at a level that improves student learning. School districts fulfill these dual responsibilities by embracing a vision of education that engages every educator in effective professional learning every day.

Too few school districts today succeed in achieving this vision. A ruthless assessment will help determine barriers to the vision as well as opportunities for achieving it. Learning system leaders examine the processes that support districtwide and individual learning. They ask questions about leaders' capacity to guide the essential work needed to reach the district's goals. They examine how learning and support are organized

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and differentiated for individuals and groups. They seek clear expectations and accountability for implementation. They ensure that data are leveraged to guide necessary change.

In many districts, professional development is treated as an end, rather than a means to accomplish important goals. School districts spend considerable effort figuring out what counts rather than what matters. Too much of the professional development conversation focuses on credits, licenses, and salaries. Too little focuses on what educators need to improve their performance and that of their students.

Learning systems assess their resources. They are able to account for all expenditures and are not reluctant to deploy them in ways that make a significant difference. Learning system leaders are prepared to ask tough questions regarding the purpose, process, and impact of investments in professional learning.

Learning systems take a hard look at their expectations for professional learning. They build school capacity and support school leaders in leveraging professional learning to produce intended results. Central office staff embrace new roles to ensure the cycle of improvement is effectively implemented in all schools.

System leaders turn their vision into reality by

- Adopting a local professional development policy that offers a vision, recognizes Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning, and uses its definition of quality professional learning to create educators’ learning;

Learning systems organize professional learning within communities to advance continuous improvement, promote collective responsibility, and support alignment of individual, team, school, and school district goals.

- Shifting district requirements related to school improvement to focus on a cycle of continuous learning and the lessons and results achieved through implementation;
- Establishing and supporting demonstration sites where early adopters can demonstrate the power of the vision of a professional learning system and motivate all constituencies to move toward the vision; and
- Using early adopters’ results to provide the additional leverage and support necessary to sustain any successful change effort.

Engage in continuous improvement

The first standard of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning addresses learning communities and offers a clear, concise, and compelling description of adult actions in a learning system:

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

Learning systems organize professional learning within communities to advance continuous improvement, promote collective responsibility, and support alignment of individual, team, school, and school district goals. Learning systems ensure that learning communities convene regularly and frequently during the workday to strengthen teacher practice and boost student achievement. Learning community members are accountable to one another for achieving school and district goals and supporting continuous improvement.

Learning communities follow a cycle of continuous improvement, engaging in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. The cycle of continuous improvement is characterized by these actions:

- Using data to determine student and educator learning needs
- Identifying shared goals for student and educator learning
- Extending educators’ knowledge of content, content-specific pedagogy, student learning patterns, and classroom management strategies
- Selecting and implementing appropriate, evidence-based strategies to achieve student and educator learning goals

- Applying learning with job-embedded support
- Using evidence to monitor and refine implementation and to evaluate results

Create alignment and accountability

Professional learning provides ongoing support for continuous improvement and implementation of school and districtwide initiatives. School district leaders create policies that establish formal accountability for results along with the support needed to avoid fragmentation and silo building, and achieve results. To be effective, these policies and supports align with an explicit vision and goals for the district.

Members of learning communities align their goals with those of the school and school district, engage in continuous professional learning, and hold all members collectively accountable for results. The professional learning that occurs within learning communities supports and is supported by policy and governance, curriculum and instruction, human resources, and other functions within a school district. Learning community members bridge the knowing-doing gap by transforming macro-level learning (knowledge and skill development) into micro-level learning (the practices and refinements necessary for full implementation in the classroom or workplace). When professional learning occurs within a district driven by high expectations, shared goals, professionalism, and peer accountability, the outcome is deep change for individuals and districts (Learning Forward, 2011).

Develop collective responsibility

Learning system leaders promote responsibility for the learning of all students within the school or school district. Collective responsibility brings together members of the education

workforce—teachers, support staff, school district staff, administrators, families, policymakers, and other stakeholders—to increase effective teaching in every classroom. Within learning systems, peer accountability—rather than formal or administrative accountability—ignites a commitment to professional learning. Collective participation advances the goals of a whole school or team, as well as those of individuals. Communities of caring, analytic, reflective, and inquiring educators

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collaborate to learn what is necessary to increase student learning. Every student benefits from the strengths and expertise of every educator when communities of educators learn together.

Within learning systems and communities, members exchange feedback about their practices, visit one another's classrooms or work settings, and share resources. Colleagues strive to refine their collaboration, communication, and relationship skills to work within and across both internal and external systems to support student learning. They develop norms of collaboration and relational trust and use processes and structures that unleash expertise and strengthen capacity to analyze, plan, implement, support, and evaluate their practices.

Although some professional learning—such as learning designed to address individual development goals—occurs individually, the more educators share and support each other's learning, the more quickly a culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for

students and educators grows. Collective responsibility and participation foster peer-to-peer support for learning and maintain learners' consistent focus on shared goals within and across communities. Technology facilitates and expands community interaction, learning, resource archiving and sharing, and knowledge construction and sharing. Some educators may meet with peers virtually in

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local or global communities to focus on individual, team, school, or school district improvement goals. Technology improves cross-community communication within schools, among schools, and among school districts; reinforces shared goals; promotes information sharing; strengthens coherence; taps into educators' expertise; and increases access to and use of resources.

Communities of learners may vary in size; include members with similar or different roles and responsibilities; and meet face-to-face, virtually, or in a blended format. Educators may be members of multiple learning communities. Some communities may include members who share common students, areas of responsibility, roles, interests, or goals. Because the education system reaches out to include students, their families, community members, the education workforce, and public officials who share responsibility for

student achievement, some learning communities may include representatives of these groups.

Commit to change

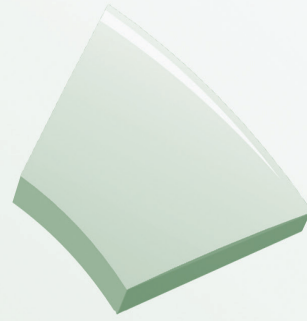
Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness for all students must occur at all levels in the district to ensure high levels of practice. True learning systems fully implement the definition of quality professional learning. Learning system leaders must recognize that scaled and sustained learning for all will not happen by chance; they must create a culture that values learning and develop conditions that enable such learning to occur.

Each year, parents approach school or district administrators to get their children assigned to the “best teachers” or transferred to the “best schools.” As educators strive to implement strategies that transition their district to a learning system, they hold on to the moral imperative that no matter where students are assigned, those students will

- Have the benefit of the thinking, expertise, and dedication of all teachers in that grade level or subject area;
- Be part of a school system that requires all teachers to participate in learning teams that are given regular time to plan, study, and solve problems together; and
- Benefit from collaboration ensuring that best practices and high expectations spread across classrooms and grade levels.

Given that these same expectations are held for principals, best practices and support also spread from school to school. Through a commitment to systemic change, learning system leaders ensure that every student experiences quality teaching every day.

Reflection questions



- Why is having a vision for professional learning important?
- How do leaders in learning systems ensure that all staff throughout the system share a common vision and understanding of quality professional learning?
- How does a learning system maintain progress toward achieving its vision?
- What are the most critical attributes of a vision for professional learning in our district?
- What is the relationship between having a detailed description of a learning community and a vision for professional learning?
- How can district and school leaders develop a culture of collective responsibility for student learning?

RESOURCES

Darling-Hammond, L. et al. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and beyond.* Oxford OH: NSDC.

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Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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TOOLS INDEX

TOOL	TITLE	PURPOSE
2.1	Understanding shared vision	Study the theory and practice of learning organizations.
2.2	Blue sky scenario	Stimulate district leaders' thinking about what a successful educational system for all students might look like.
2.3	Forecasting scenario	Help district leadership teams consider alternatives to the current reality and challenge the way the district functions in order to create a more successful system.
2.4	Diagnosing your district culture	Assess the relationship between the central office and building leaders.
2.5	Ensure effective district and school leadership	Complete a self-evaluation of your school or district's progress toward practices and policies that support becoming a learning system.
2.6	Learning Communities Standard	Articulate key elements of learning communities in order to create a vision and mission for a learning system.