

# Components of a comprehensive learning system

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

**Our school district is developing a plan that addresses all the components of a comprehensive learning system, as well as the fundamental purposes of professional learning.**

STRONGLY AGREE      AGREE      NO OPINION      DISAGREE      STRONGLY DISAGREE

---

**We have clearly defined central office roles and responsibilities as they relate to professional learning.**

STRONGLY AGREE      AGREE      NO OPINION      DISAGREE      STRONGLY DISAGREE

---

**Our school district has systems in place to monitor and continuously improve professional learning.**

STRONGLY AGREE      AGREE      NO OPINION      DISAGREE      STRONGLY DISAGREE

---

**We regularly and systematically evaluate professional learning's effect on educator practice and student results.**

STRONGLY AGREE      AGREE      NO OPINION      DISAGREE      STRONGLY DISAGREE

---

**We have redefined district leaders' roles and responsibilities to ensure great schools throughout the school district.**

STRONGLY AGREE      AGREE      NO OPINION      DISAGREE      STRONGLY DISAGREE

---

A professional learning system “is like the engine in an automobile,” writes Joellen Killion (2013) in an *Education Week* blog. “Just as an engine propels a vehicle, professional learning drives an education system. Indeed, one might say that learning drives change.”

Schools and school districts, state and federal education agencies, initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards, and new assessments for students and approaches to measuring educator effectiveness all have created a new imperative for a different type of professional learning—a different engine that will drive teaching for deeper learning.

Changes as significant as those that educators face require examining, tuning, or rebuilding the learning engine. While most districts and states have created systems for professional learning, few are comprehensive under the definition of

While most districts and states have created systems for professional learning, few are comprehensive under the definition of a learning system.

a learning system. They were created by opportunity and happenstance as districts and schools added courses and programs in response to initiatives. Rather than add on yet again, district and state leaders remodel professional learning so that it is purposeful, finely tuned, and provides every educator with continual learning opportunities. Then, they must periodically maintain and replace options so that professional learning, the engine of education systems, can increase educators’ efficiency, effectiveness, and reliability. When they

create a new infrastructure and support it, leaders ensure professional learning achieves its purposes.

## Create the infrastructure

The learning system’s infrastructure comprises six core components (Learning Forward, 2013) that drive educator and student learning. How the components interact varies according to the context in which they operate. Learning system leaders guide the continuous improvement process, as well as plans for professional learning, by assessing how applicable the components are to their context and determining where to focus attention.

### 1. Vision and mission statements

Most educators recognize the value of adopting vision and mission statements. Many districts and schools have adopted a short statement as well as a longer version documenting educators’ commitment to the educational experience and to the outcomes they seek for their students. In some cases, they develop a narrative describing the role that educators, parents, and other stakeholders will play in achieving the vision.

Learning system leaders are deliberate about stating how educator learning helps achieve the vision. They formally adopt vision and mission statements for professional learning. The statements may be extracted from the longer district vision statement or written as a corollary to the vision statement. They may expand the district vision with a vision of professional learning. The professional learning statement may include the aspiration (vision) and function (mission) of professional learning.

Learning Forward adopted a vision statement:

- “Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.”

Other examples:

- “Every educator commits to continuous learning and collaborative problem solving so that all students succeed.”
- “Every educator shares collective responsibility for continuous improvement and success for every student.”

A mission statement identifies the learning system’s purpose and function. Learning Forward created a mission statement:

- “Advancing educator effectiveness and results for all students through standards-based professional learning.”

Other examples:

- “To ensure educators’ effectiveness through standards-based professional learning.”
- “To improve instruction every day for every student through continuous learning for educators.”

Vision and mission statements direct professional learning toward a fundamental purpose: Improve educator effectiveness so that students achieve success.

## 2. Standards for Professional Learning

Professional learning standards define the essential elements of quality professional learning that produce its intended effect on educators and students. District leaders use the standards to guide planning, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning. Adopting and using standards promotes equity, excellence, and effectiveness of professional learning and demonstrates the district’s commitment to quality learning for all employees. Standards are not just a checklist; they are the foundation for supporting continuous improvement in a learning system. All standards have equal weight and are essential to achieving intended goals for professional learning.

## 3. A definition of quality professional learning

Definitions help learning systems promote common understandings and expectations. Although standards define conditions and elements, definitions offer detail and direction. A definition of professional learning translates standards into learning practices for educators. The definition operationalizes the standards into educators’ day-to-day work and answers the question of

Adopting and using standards promotes equity, excellence, and effectiveness of professional learning and demonstrates the district’s commitment to quality learning for all employees.

what standards-based professional learning looks like in practice. The definition offers insight into what kinds of experiences the school district wants educators to have and can provide exemplars for effective learning experiences. It helps staff members see how the standards integrate into a cohesive and powerful system of learning and support.

## 4. New roles and responsibilities

Learning system leaders declare new roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder group and detail new responsibilities in job descriptions. They use Innovation Configurations to document the continuum of practices that those in various departments and roles use to advance and implement high-quality professional learning. Through job descriptions and Innovation Configuration maps, learning system leaders articulate, support, assess, and refine staff responsibilities related to professional learning.

## Definition of Professional Development

Working with our allies and advocates, Learning Forward created this formal definition of professional development for use in the reauthorized version of the No Child Left Behind Act. Learn more about the definition at <http://learningforward.org/who-we-are/professional-learning-definition>.

### **Proposed Amendments to Section 9101 (34) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.**

(34) PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT—The term “professional development” means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement.

- (A) Professional development fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance and must be comprised of professional learning that
- (1) is aligned with rigorous state student academic achievement standards, as well as related local educational agency and school improvement goals;
  - (2) 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; and
  - (3) primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff members where the teams of educators engage in a continuous cycle of improvement that —
    - (i) evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and student performance;
    - (ii) defines a clear set of educator learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data;
    - (iii) achieves the educator learning goals identified in subsection (A)(3)(ii) by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidenced-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments, that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;
    - (iv) provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom;
    - (v) regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards;
    - (vi) informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and
    - (vii) that may be supported by external assistance.
- (B) The process outlined in (A) may be supported by activities such as courses, workshops, institutes, networks, and conferences that
- (1) must address the learning goals and objectives established for professional development by educators at the school level;
  - (2) advance the ongoing school-based professional development; and
  - (3) are provided by for-profit and nonprofit entities outside the school such as universities, education service agencies, technical assistance providers, networks of content-area specialists, and other education organizations and associations.

When learning is placed at the center of educators' work, school district leaders discover opportunities to reduce fragmentation and increase integration. Department staffs and individuals find new reasons to collaborate. Cross-department teams break down traditional silos, and the organization is restructured as operating systems evolve.

### 5. Ongoing assessments and evaluation

Assessment tools and evaluation plans are essential for monitoring professional learning's effects and for making improvements in order to generate better results. Comprehensive learning systems collect data, create clear and accepted goals and outcomes, monitor implementation, ensure formative and summative measures, and schedule final reports.

### 6. Resources to support professional learning

Professional learning cannot happen without critical resources, including personnel, funding, time, and facilities. Learning systems use external and internal audits to identify existing resources and allocate them in ways that achieve the highest-quality outcomes.

### Address the three purposes of professional learning

Professional learning exists to advance educator practice in order to improve student achievement. To plan professional learning to achieve these outcomes, educators consider three fundamental purposes of professional learning:

- Individual development
- Team and school improvement
- Program implementation

To ensure that educator practice and student learning improve *systemwide*, comprehensive learning systems address all three purposes.

**Individual development.** Learning system leaders recognize that pathways to individual improvement are the foundation for ensuring each educator has the opportunity to succeed. They align individuals' development with educator evaluations, using evaluations and observation feedback to inform professional learning on pedagogy, and data on student outcomes to help identify what content knowledge teachers may need to learn. Districts create systems to help individuals identify strengths and weaknesses, make available professional learning opportunities to address areas of need, and then monitor individual performance to determine if expected improvements occur.

Many districts create teaching and learning frameworks and evaluation rubrics to define educator performance expectations. Teaching and learning frameworks and rubrics give teachers clear targets for quality teaching, allow for explicit feedback, and can help the district align professional development with individual improvement. Teacher learning frameworks prompt teachers to develop individual growth plans that are tied to performance and student outcomes. Supervisors, coaches, and peers guide individuals through developing a personal growth plan that honors that individual's strengths and addresses areas that require attention.

Supervisors, coaches, and peers participate in the growth plan cycle by examining student and educator performance data, selecting learning targets, setting growth goals, identifying strategies for achieving the targets and goals, and then monitoring results and using feedback to ensure the plan is followed and goals are achieved. In learning systems, the development plan cycle typically occurs within learning team and school leadership team improvement cycles. Educators share goals, learn, and implement new practices together in order to learn from one another and create better results for all students.

Individual growth plans allow teachers to target their specific needs and get the support they need to make necessary improvements; however, individual growth plans alone will not allow the learning system to achieve its vision.

**Team and school improvement.** Learning systems also require team and school improvement plans that follow the same cyclical process outlined for individuals but which require teachers to collaborate with their peers, a move that results in increased support and, sometimes, accountability. Schools typically organize learning teams by grade level or subject.

Grade-level or subject learning teams engage in a cycle of continuous improvement that requires team members to assess student performance data on an ongoing basis, identify student and adult learning needs, select learning strategies, implement what they have learned in classrooms, offer feedback and follow up, and assess results. The group may repeat the cycle several times a year as members achieve one set of outcomes and move on to their next challenges.

Team and school improvement stresses building capacity at the school level for educators to use data to identify strengths and determine areas of weakness. Teachers need dedicated time within the school day to work in teams on the cycle of continuous improvement, professional learning that often is referred to as *job embedded*. Teachers work in professional learning communities to improve the whole school and use formative and summative student achievement data to drive their learning.

Learning system leaders ensure that school-based educators have the support they need to implement what they learn in ways that produce the desired outcomes. Leaders responsible for guiding such processes are well-prepared and

skilled, undertaking tasks such as monitoring school data to indicate where school-based educators need additional help.

**Program implementation.** In most school districts, the central office is responsible for developing programs to ensure all students reach college- and career-ready standards. Learning systems ensure that teachers and schools consistently implement the desired programs.

Learning systems recognize that educators deserve support through quality professional learning to implement curricula, instructional strategies, or technology the district has adopted. They determine the professional learning educators need in order to implement a program well by gathering observational data on key practices and methods.

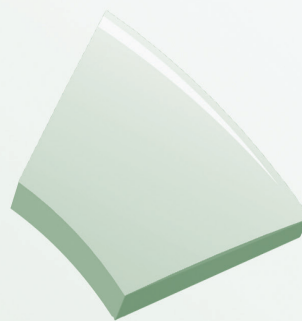
The learning system may develop programs for a particular grade level, subject, or selected schools. Central office leaders are responsible for ensuring that these programs are implemented with fidelity, and are charged with planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development.

Ultimately, individual, team, school, and program plans all must be part of a comprehensive strategy ensuring that no individual tries to learn and implement too much in one year. The learning system must have a clear purpose and goals, along with plans and processes to support them. Without a clear purpose, educators will either ignore plans or touch upon them lightly, and little improvement will occur.

Developing or redesigning a school district into a learning system is accomplished in many ways. The work is complex, yet the result is a broad-based understanding of research and an appreciation of and advocacy for the contribution professional learning must make to achieving the district vision and mission.



# Reflection questions



- Which aspects of a learning system are new to us?
- What are some benefits of the six components recommended for a learning system?
- Which components are well-developed in our district? How do we know?
- Which components could benefit from our attention?
- How does our school district address the three purposes for professional learning?
- What district systems might change if all educators in our district identified learning as our core work?

## RESOURCES

**Killion, J. (2013).** *Professional learning plans: A workbook for states, districts, and schools*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at <http://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/professional-learning-plans.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

**Killion, J. (2013).** *Comprehensive professional learning system: A workbook for states and districts*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at <http://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/comprehensive-professional-learning-system.pdf?sfvrsn=10>

**Killion, J. & Roy, P. (2008).** *Becoming a learning school*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

**Von Frank, V. (2009, August/September).** Leadership teams create lasting change. *Tools for Schools*, 13(1), 1–4.

**Von Frank, V. (2010, April).** State policy is key to building strong leaders: An interview with Gene Wilhoit. *JSD*, 31(2), 19–22.

## TOOLS INDEX

TOOL	TITLE	PURPOSE
3.1	Designing a learning system	Help task force members make critical operational decisions related to designing a professional learning system.
3.2	Policy attributes rubric	Rate current policies according to key policy attributes.
3.3	Linking systems for success	Examine how a learning system connects with other systems.
3.4	Leadership for a learning system	Conduct a periodic review of leadership responsibilities for the learning system.
3.5	Three purposes of professional learning	Clarify the three major purposes of professional learning in order to develop shared understanding.
3.6	Continuous improvement of a comprehensive professional learning system	Prioritize continuous improvements to the comprehensive professional learning system.