



## Becoming a Learning System

### Course Syllabus

#### Course Introduction

Professional learning research has underscored the importance of strong collaborative work among educators as an essential component of effective professional learning. For decades, educational research has considered the school as the center of change. As a result, the focus of work on effective professional learning centered on schools and more precisely on small learning communities originating within the school.

For most of a decade, publications, toolkits, books, newsletters, conference sessions, and regional gatherings focused on how effective professional learning teams could plan, conduct, and evaluate their own professional learning activities in order to improve educator knowledge and skill and result in improved student learning.

Standards of professional learning were developed and the first standard was Learning Communities because of the pivotal role learning teams play in effective professional learning. Along with those standards, a set of Innovation Configuration maps were developed to describe the role of schools boards, superintendents, central office, professional development directors, principals, instructional coaches, and teachers needed to play to implement those standards and improve student learning.

The importance that the system has played had always been acknowledged. More recent research emphasized the importance of also focusing on the system in order to create conditions that promoted effective professional learning. Without system leadership understanding and acting in new ways to promote effective professional learning, the system landscape would always be dotted with incredible schools surrounded by less than stellar schools within the same district boundaries. The goal was to ensure that there were not isolated islands of excellence; all schools needed to excel in order for all students to excel.

*Becoming a Learning System* was written by Stephanie Hirsh, Frederick Brown, and Kay Psencik and published in 2014 by Learning Forward. It embodies Learning Forward's vision of a learning system and describes district leaders' roles in such systems. Applying the information in this book can result in an organization that experiences and models high-quality professional learning and inspires everyone within the organization to take responsibility for the learning of every adult and student within the system.

The task of becoming a learning system involves multiple components and an assortment of tasks that must be understood and embraced by the entire system: school board members, superintendents, central office administrators, principals, and teacher leaders. Becoming a learning system involves

embedding a culture of continuous improvement which is supported and sustained by internal systems and structures. It will involve multiple years of sustained work. Becoming a learning system requires the entire system to work together, learn together, and restructure internal procedures, policies, and processes to support ongoing learning.

Obviously, an online course cannot substitute for the conversations, debates, and discussions that need to be held within a district. As a result, this online course has been structured in two ways. Traditionally, online courses target individuals and allows them to pace themselves as they work through online modules and activities. Individuals can take this course.

We have also structured the material to allow a small Study Team to move through the modules. The Study Team might be charged by the Superintendent or Leadership Team to learn more about what is involved in becoming a learning system and to make a recommendation to the system about whether or not to pursue this goal as a whole district. Directions have been divided into a set for individual participants and alternatives for Study Teams.

This is an introductory course that focuses on the first four fundamental chapters of *Becoming a Learning System* as well as a chapter which addresses building trust. These chapters establish the purpose, vision, and basics of a comprehensive system of professional learning. They illustrate the conversations, self-examination, and thoughtful consideration of this work. It also provides opportunities to delve into conversations, collaborative learning, and self-assessments provided within the chapter tools. It has not been structured as an overview but rather a taste to help you decide whether you would like to go deeper into the work.

## Course Modules

This course consists of five modules:

**Module One:** Introduction and Beliefs and Assumptions

**Module Two:** Visions of a Learning System

**Module Three:** Components of a Comprehensive Learning System

**Module Four:** Deep Dive into the Professional Learning Standards

**Module Five:** Establishing Trust

## Course Outcomes

*Participants, who complete this course, will be able to*

1. Articulate a rationale for becoming a learning system.
2. Describe the fundamental knowledge and skills required to become a learning system.
3. Describe the essential elements of a comprehensive learning system.
4. Reflect on how to align their district's professional learning with the standards of professional learning.
5. Describe specific behaviors and actions that build or damage trust.

## Module One: Introduction to Becoming a Learning System and Beliefs and Assumptions

**Essential Question:** *How do your underlying assumptions and beliefs shape your approach and understanding of professional learning?*

### Module Outcomes

Learners, who complete this module, will be able to

1. Articulate a rationale for becoming a learning system.
2. Identify their current beliefs and assumptions about professional learning.
3. Explain the purpose and need for a Teachable Point of View.
4. Describe the purpose and conditions of *Dialogue*.

### Topics

- **Premise:** District needs to play a role in developing all schools—ensure every student has a knowledgeable and competent teacher
- Power Point Introduction
  - Reading: Introduction and Forward to *Becoming a Learning System (BLSys)*
  - Webinar—April 25, 2013: Paul Ash
- Open Space Forum
- Beliefs and Assumptions
  - Reading: Chapter I from BLSys
  - Tool 1.1: Beliefs about Professional Learning
- Tool 1.5: Leaders Task—Teachable Point of View (TPV)
  - *Teachable Points of View for Leadership:* Dennis Sparks
  - Sample TPV: Doing the Laundry and Hanging Fans: Parker McMullen
- Module Assessment

## Module Two: The What: Definitions and Vision of a Learning System

**Essential Question:** *How does developing a vision of a learning system facilitate the implementation of new practices, procedures, and programs within the district which will lead to improved teacher practice and increased student learning?*

### Module Outcomes:

Learners, who complete this module, will be able to

1. Define the attributes of a learning system.
2. Describe the difference between a shared vision and a mission statement.
3. Evaluate the usefulness of tools for developing a learning system within their local context.
4. Explain the importance of the three key components of the Learning Communities standard.
5. Explain the critical need for collective responsibility within a learning system.

## Topics

- Reading Chapter 2: *Visions of a Learning System*
- Open Space Forum
- *Becoming a Learning School* Webinar, September 4<sup>th</sup> 2014: Stephanie Hirsh, Frederick Brown, and Kay Psencik
  - Reflection
- Tool 2.2 Blue Sky and Tool 2.3 Forecasting
  - Reflection
- Tool 2.4: Diagnose your district culture
- Tool 2.5: *Learning Community Standard*
  - Learning Community video: Shirley Hord
  - Reflection
- Module Assessment

## Module Three: Components of a Comprehensive Learning System

**Essential Question:** *What is a comprehensive professional learning system and how do we create it?*

### Module Outcomes:

*Learners, who complete this module, will be able to*

1. Describe the essential elements of a comprehensive learning system.
2. Define the steps necessary to improve their current professional learning.
3. Compare and contrast their current situation with the tools provided to determine whether they are applicable.
4. Discuss the relationship between professional learning and other internal systems/departments within their district.

## Topics

- Reading: Chapter 3 BLSys
  - Reflection
- Tool 3.1: Designing a learning system
- Open Space
- Tool 3.3: Linking systems for success
- Reflection
- Tool 3.5: Three purposes of professional learning and Tool 3.6: Continuous improvement of a comprehensive professional learning system
- Open Space
- Module Assessment

## Module Four: Deep Dive into the Professional Learning Standards

**Essential Question:** How do the standards of professional learning improve the learning of individuals, teams, and schools?

### Module Outcomes:

Learners, who complete this module, will be able to

1. Compare their current situation to full implementation of the standards
2. Plan a path forward to better align their district's professional learning with the standards
3. Discuss the interconnectedness of the standards of professional learning

### Topics

- Video: Standards Overview, Stephanie Hirsh
- Reading: Chapter 4 BLSys
  - Reflection
- Tool 4.1: *Understanding the Standards for Professional Learning*
- Webinar: Theory of Change, Patricia Roy
- Power Point: Model Windowpane format
  - Reflection
- Tool 4.2: *A Playbook for Professional Learning*
  - Video on the Implementation standard: Stephanie Hirsh, Executive Director
  - Reading: *The emperor has no clothes*
- Open Space
- Tool 4.3: *Connecting the Standards*
- Open Space
- Module Assessment

## Module Five: Establishing Trust

**Essential Question:** How and why do you build and maintain trust in a learning system?

### Module Outcomes:

Participants, who complete this module, will be able to

1. Describe specific behaviors and actions that build trust or damage trust
2. Describe the difference between congeniality and collegiality
3. Describe how and when “getting acquainted” activities might be appropriate
4. Recognize the importance of clear parameters for tasks that increase trust
5. Develop a Charge Statement that is related to their current work

### Topics

- Power Point: Leadership Trust
- Open Space
- Reading: Chapter 10: Building Trust, BLSys

- Tool 10.1: *Let's get acquainted!*
- Power Point: Trust, Congeniality vs Collegiality
- Open Space
- Tools 10.2: Self-assessment and 10.3: Creating a trust pyramid
  - Application Activity
  - Reflection
- Tool 10.7: *Effectively coordinating action*
  - Power Point
  - Charge statement
  - Reflection
- Module Assessment

**Epilogue:** These activities and conversations are foundational, a study team doing this is not sufficient—the whole system needs to experience this, gain information, develop new skills. It's the process as well as the product that is important. Additional topics that will also be addressed within the book include:

- Role of the school board
- Role of the superintendent
- Role of district leaders
- Role of principals and teacher leaders
- Role of external assistance providers
- Moving from vision to action
- Analyzing student learning
- Develop an instructional framework
- Building a learning agenda
- Shifting educator practice
- Leveraging performance evaluations
- Engaging parents and family members
- Influencing decision makers
- Focus labor/management work
- Build leader pipeline
- Networking to accelerate learning
- Coaching for improvement
- Celebrate progress

Vision:

- Video: System Integration—FortWayne (12 minutes)

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