

Foreword

Nothing will change unless everything changes. In the arena of school improvement, this statement rings especially true.

As school districts have faced increasingly high expectations and heard ever louder demands for improvements that will lead to higher student achievement, the responsibility for improvement has fallen squarely on teachers' shoulders. State and school district officials have planned what teachers must do to implement reform initiatives, yet seldom have they looked to themselves for needed change.

If schools are expected to produce better results for students, the school district as a whole and its leaders—school board members, superintendents, central office administrators, principals, and teacher leaders—must heed lessons from systems change research that remind practitioners they must change the component systems in order to change the system as a whole. School districts, regardless of size, are complex, with multiple interrelated component systems: human capital, data, curriculum, instruction, assessment, support services, parents and community members, governance, and budget and finance. The success of any change depends on leaders' ability to examine, analyze, and

orchestrate changes within components of the whole system to achieve different results.

Leaders must be ready to thoughtfully, critically, and analytically examine their current practices and make essential modifications that support deep and sustained implementation of learning initiatives. Only when district leaders commit to this level of work will schools be able to meet the expectation that they will increase educator effectiveness and, in turn, improve student learning.

In other words, schools are able to succeed only when they have support from the central office. When educators strive to refine their efforts to improve student achievement, their efforts must be embedded in a culture of continuous improvement and supported by systems and structures that afford them the resources, tools, and learning needed to meet their goals.

Sustainable organizational change requires building a shared vision and values among partners; developing skillful and committed leaders; engaging stakeholders in planning, making decisions about, implementing, and adapting new practices; understanding the landscape within which the change is occurring; building staff members' capacity; and strengthening the organizational infrastructure.

Authors Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown have applied their wisdom and expertise—and Learning Forward’s wealth of resources related to achieving educator effectiveness and student success—to writing this book. They offer strategies educators can use to leverage professional learning to create meaningful change.

Becoming a Learning System is a companion to *Becoming a Learning School* (NSDC, 2009) and focuses on the critical dimension of a school district’s role in improving teaching so that more students learn at higher levels. It is based on the same principles as those featured in the earlier book:

- Learning is at the heart of every change.
- Leaders and leadership matter.
- Continuous improvement requires focused action.
- Student success is a collective responsibility.

The authors strategically build on the premise that leaders must strengthen adult learning in order to succeed with any change initiative. They examine the role of district leaders in creating and carrying out a vision of continuous improvement for the entire system. They ground their writing in research and practice to create a useful resource that will allow leaders to plan, implement, and evaluate professional learning.

As this book demonstrates, when teacher change is accompanied by changes in principals’ practices and support from central offices and state agencies, students are more likely to succeed.

Introduction

We have many good schools throughout North America. In too many cases, however, children go each day to a school that is not very good. Even more unfortunate is the fact that two students who are very alike can attend different schools within the *same school district* and achieve very different outcomes.

Every child deserves to graduate high school ready for a career or college. Every child needs the knowledge and skills to pursue his or her goals and reach his or her potential. Every child should be prepared to participate in a democratic and civil society. To accomplish this vision, we need to ensure that every child attends an excellent school.

For all students to attend great schools, we need school districts that are *learning systems*. At Learning Forward, we believe this goal is attainable; however, reaching it requires that all school districts, as well as all schools, focus more intently on learning. We need both learning schools *and* learning systems.

In learning systems, all educators commit to continuous learning and to applying that learning to their own and others' performance. Educators at the district and school levels share responsibility for their own learning and for ensuring great teaching for every student every day.

In learning systems, individuals understand their role in and responsibility for helping the district achieve its vision, mission, goals, and objectives. In learning systems, educators at every level of the organization share responsibility for student

and adult learning, dedicate themselves to continuous improvement, use data to drive decisions, and monitor and adjust their practices based on feedback.

Learning Forward has dedicated the last 20 years to thinking about and studying great teaching, and to designing and creating resources and tools to help and support district leaders in their role as learning leaders. The clearest examples of the organization's efforts to support learning systems are Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, definition of professional learning, and Innovation Configuration maps for district employees.

This book is based on Learning Forward's definition of professional learning and Standards for Professional Learning, which together offer district leaders a framework to guide daily decisions that promote continuous improvement. The book outlines the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors district leaders need in order to lead, facilitate, and coach school leaders and leadership teams to embed the definition and standards into educators' daily routines.

The tools and strategies that accompany the definition and Standards can guide district staff in establishing principal learning communities, monitoring implementation of new initiatives, determining the meaning and implications of data, coaching principals to higher levels of performance, providing feedback to colleagues and principals, and much more.