

Leaders play key roles in the professional learning ecosystem



BY SARAH L. WOULFIN

Atiger in the arctic. Sunflowers in a coral reef. Would they thrive — or even survive — in those ecosystems? Probably not, despite being strong and resilient species. Similarly, even well-designed, evidence-based professional learning must occur in a supportive, rather than endangering, ecosystem to take root and thrive.

In my experiences as a researcher and a practitioner across states and districts, I have observed and engaged in ecosystems that support high-quality professional learning and

promote improvement. But I have also seen situations where professional learning is dropped into schools, with high expectations for learning and change, but with little consideration of the nature and vitality of the wider ecosystem.

Sometimes, reformers and administrators may neglect to account for how organizational structures and conditions shape adult learning, or they neglect to align professional learning with existing programs and priorities in the school.

Ecosystems that support professional learning have multiple

complex components and function in a dynamic manner. For professional learning to stick, leaders must attend to those components, shifting attention away from designing and implementing professional learning in isolation and toward sustaining the entire ecosystem.

COMPONENTS OF THE ECOSYSTEM

The professional learning ecosystem includes an array of educators, ranging from the superintendent and other district leaders to coaches to teachers and paraprofessionals to student support staff. As in other kinds of

ecosystems, schools thrive when their members not only coexist but cooperate.

There are benefits when leaders and teachers participate in professional learning together (Woulfin, 2016). For instance, when principals, instructional coaches, and teachers engage in professional learning on mathematics instruction together, it builds capacity in a unified direction, assisting with school improvement (Neumerski, 2013; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017).

Ecosystems also have vital, nonliving components, including soil and water or, in the case of schools, funding, time, space, and other resources (Grubb & Allen, 2011). For professional learning to stick and catalyze change, we need to bolster these resources.

When designing and facilitating professional learning, leaders should check whether resources and goals are aligned. For example, they should examine how schedules and routines enable or inhibit collaborative professional learning. They should also consider the strengths and limitations of available or needed online platforms to optimize learning opportunities, especially in the era of COVID-19. They should ensure that classroom resources, such as science kits, arrive in time for teachers to engage with them during professional learning — for example, about implementing lessons aligned with the Next Generation

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Science Standards.

Unfortunately, invasive species can proliferate and damage an ecosystem. A notable example in schools is racism (Annamma et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). More concretely, racism can have a limiting effect on who leads and participates in professional learning, lead to deficit-based messages about students of color, and poison the ecosystem in other ways.

This damages working conditions for educators of color, impedes change efforts, and hampers efforts to develop anti-racist, equity-centered educators (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020) and achieve equity and social justice. For these reasons, it is critical to analyze and dismantle racism in professional learning structures and activities.

DYNAMICS OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Ecosystems rely on flows of energy to sustain life. In the professional learning ecosystem, that energy comes from many directions. For example, a district leader's presence signals the importance of learning

and collaboration. A coach's sustained support for new practices keeps the learning going. Teachers' ongoing collaboration helps knowledge and practices grow.

Ecosystems are dynamic; they change over time. A professional learning ecosystem might prioritize phonics instruction at one point in time and elementary science instruction at another, or middle school social and emotional learning at one time and writing instruction at another. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift toward professional learning on remote learning strategies as well as health and safety procedures (Wan, 2020). District and school leaders should chart these waves of professional learning and clearly explain shifts.

Interconnections among components of the professional learning ecosystem nourish development and change. Leaders nourish learning when they promote coaching and work alongside teachers and other leaders to tailor professional learning (Woulfin, 2016). Teachers nourish learning by sharing their practices with colleagues, supporting other staff, and communicating openly with district and school leaders (Horn & Little, 2010). Across roles, communication and collaboration feed adult learning and school improvement (DuFour, 2004).

The professional learning ecosystem can be damaged, preventing

professional learning from sticking. Leaders should tend to the ecosystem, for example, by considering how policies and events might shock the system and harm relationships. On a brighter note, ecosystems can heal, so leaders can actively work to rejuvenate the learning ecosystem if it is harmed.

IMPROVING THE ECOSYSTEM FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Leaders play several key roles in ensuring a thriving professional learning ecosystem, not only in allocating time and space but also in the messages they send and the practices they model.

Leaders should set clear expectations for professional learning and articulate roles and responsibilities. For instance, they should explain how teachers will engage with instructional coaches and how teachers will interact in data team meetings. They should also celebrate educators' learning to elevate and encourage continued growth. This entails leaders commending the ways in which teachers, other leaders, and staff have gained capacity and shifted practice. By broadcasting these steps, leaders invite other educators to learn and change.

Leaders should model how they are learning, especially regarding central issues such as culturally responsive pedagogy, remote learning, and family engagement. Additionally, leaders should celebrate educators' growth to encourage continued learning among the whole community. This includes publicly acknowledging educators' new knowledge and skills, inviting educators to share their learning and lead additional professional learning, and accepting mistakes as part of the learning process rather than penalizing staff for making them.

Leaders should demonstrate care and compassion and attend to educators' well-being so they will be ready to learn, grow, and improve.

To attend to all of these dimensions, leaders should develop and communicate a clear vision.

Caring school leadership improves conditions for adult collaboration and learning while increasing educator retention (Louis et al., 2016). In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid shifts across the education system, it is especially critical to tend to multiple facets of educators' well-being and encourage multiple forms of interaction.

All of these steps can help the professional learning ecosystem thrive so that best practices can take root and grow. To attend to all of these dimensions, leaders should develop and communicate a clear vision. They might create a visual of the professional learning ecosystem that details the ecosystem's members, the major professional learning goals and tasks, the resources required, and how the components fit together.

While developing and communicating this vision, it is essential that leaders listen to and learn from diverse members of the community, including special and general education teachers, parents, students, district leaders, school psychologists and other student support staff, and researchers. The members and components of thriving ecosystems live and grow in symbiosis. School communities should do the same.

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