



WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Frederick Brown and Sharron Helmke

NO MORE RANDOM ACTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Districts need a comprehensive approach to professional learning that aligns goals and strategies across the entire system.

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As schools seek to heal their communities after more than a year of disruption, professional learning is key to ensuring that educators at every level have the knowledge and capacity to meet students' and staff members' needs.

It may be tempting to address the list of needs one at a time, from academic catch-up to student mental health to teacher burnout. But random acts of professional learning do not ensure student success. Districts need a comprehensive approach to professional learning that aligns goals and strategies across the entire system.

District leaders have an opportunity to reset their professional learning efforts, thanks to new funding from reinvestment and recovery programs as well as a mandate for innovative solutions to unprecedented challenges. Instead of adopting piecemeal programs, leaders should be focused on a cohesive vision and aligning resources and efforts to address common goals.

As Sean Worley and Scott Palmer (2021) wrote in a recent blog post for The Wallace Foundation about how to use American Rescue Plan funds, "Don't just fill holes, plant seeds." When you plant seeds, you are investing in the long-term future of your district and your students.

At Learning Forward, we are encouraged by the number of districts reaching out to us for comprehensive professional learning planning and support. Through our professional services work with these districts, we have learned that the following elements are key for success.

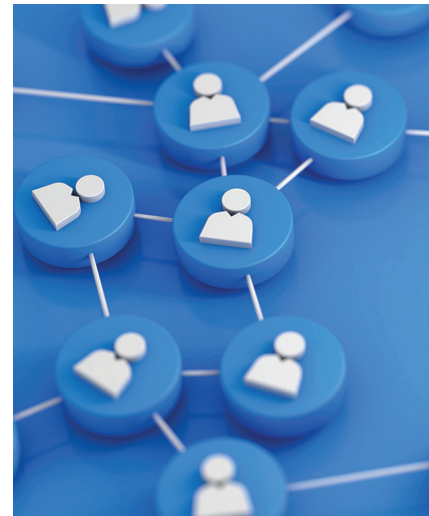
A districtwide approach to professional learning starts with a logic model. Logic models have a defined set of student goals and connect all initiatives and the work of all staff, from upper-level leaders to cafeteria workers and everyone in between, to those goals. In districts who have worked with us on developing a common logic model, like South Bend (Indiana) Community School Corporation, we observe shared purpose and consistent language that leads to powerful change for teaching and learning.

In contrast, when we observe districts where the mission and goals, strategic plan, and campus improvement plans are treated as separate efforts, leaders often struggle with prioritizing attention and effort, leaving teachers confused about how to implement improvement efforts that may feel disconnected and overwhelming.

Top-level leadership is essential. In the districts where we see the most traction with comprehensive professional learning for improved practice, like in Fort Wayne (Indiana) Community Schools, the superintendent is directly and consistently involved.

Through more than 10 years of work in Fort Wayne, then-superintendent Wendy Robinson participated alongside teachers and central office staff in planning and professional learning. That kind of engagement sends a powerful message and cements the commitment to common goals and language. This commitment is needed to scale and sustain best practice.

Vertical alignment is as important as horizontal alignment. Leaders often recognize the importance of all teachers engaging in consistent professional learning community (PLC) structures, using common assessments, and other strategies for horizontal alignment. But less commonly do



they recognize the importance of vertical alignment, making the work at one level contribute to and set up the conditions for the work at the next level.

Although the work of central office is ultimately in support of students, teachers often say they don't see the district's work as relevant to their classrooms — or they believe it is actually causing more problems and stress for them. Connections among the levels must be clear and consistent. That kind of alignment is the glue that holds a districtwide professional learning approach together.

We are seeing this approach in Arlington, Virginia, where the district has identified leadership competencies for the entire organization and is considering working toward them in communities of practice designed for everyone from bus drivers to teachers to central office staff.

Thoughtful problems of practice create cohesion across levels. Problems of practice focus educators' attention on specific needs and goals and drive the collaborative identification of strategic

steps to improvement. Engaging staff from all levels in identifying common or connected problems of practice is the glue that brings all of the professional learning work into alignment and turns organizations from a series of silos into learning systems.

Although specific problems of practice may look somewhat different for district leaders and teachers' PLCs, they should be aligned and focused on common goals to ensure success for all students.

These elements put districts on the path to a systemic approach to professional learning and therefore improving all educators' practice to meet students' evolving needs. Recovery and reinvestment funds can be a major asset for these efforts, but only if they are invested strategically and systemically.

The Council of the Great City Schools (2021) created a tool kit to help districts make those decisions wisely. It includes six questions that start with how the investments you're considering address current and long-term student needs and how they advance the

strategic plan, instructional priorities, vision, mission, and goals of the district.

We encourage you to engage in this kind of strategic thinking across your entire system, with professional learning as the backbone that builds capacity to address your goals and the initiatives that support them.

REFERENCES

- Council of the Great City Schools. (2021).** *Investing American Rescue Plan funds strategically and effectively: Guidance for school districts.* Author. www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/360/CGCS_Funds%20Resource%20Guide_v10.pdf
- Worley, S. & Palmer, S. (2021, August 4).** American Rescue Plan: Five things state and district leaders need to know now. Wallace Blog. www.wallacefoundation.org/news-and-media/blog/pages/american-rescue-plan-five-things-state-and-district-leaders-need-to-know-now.aspx ■

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instructional materials educators use with students and dedicate time and funding to ensuring that professional learning aligns with and supports implementation of high-quality instructional materials.

System-level leaders hold primary responsibility for resource allocation and coordination (in collaboration with policymakers and leaders at other levels), while school leaders often make decisions about their schools' use of those resources.

Address learning systemically

Leaders, particularly at the system or district level, create coherence by ensuring that professional learning aligns with priorities and strategic plans. This involves making connections and encouraging alignment across initiatives

and departments so that all educators are building their capacity to meet the vision and goals for every student.

When all educators are focused on continual learning, for themselves as well as their students, leaders succeed in creating a true learning system — that is, a system that learns and evolves to serve the needs of learners and a system where ambitious learning thrives.

Learning Forward is committed to building leaders' knowledge about and capacity for professional learning. Research continues to affirm the vital role of leaders for student success. A recent research synthesis commissioned by The Wallace Foundation found that the impact of principals in schools is greater than previously reported (Grissom et al., 2021).

Recognizing leaders' central role in professional learning is therefore

essential for fulfilling the aspirations of the Standards for Professional Learning — and the goals of educators, families, and communities more broadly. When we release revised Standards for Professional Learning in spring 2022, we will also publish several role-specific resources for putting the standards into practice. Look for our action guides for leaders and our ongoing investment in and supports for leaders.

REFERENCE

- Grissom, J.A., Egalite, A.J., & Lindsay, C.A. (2021, February).** *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research.* The Wallace Foundation. www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis ■