



CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

Effective principals use professional learning to strengthen teachers' understanding of and commitment to school goals and initiatives and to build their expertise in ways that entice teachers to want to stay in their school or district.

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PRINCIPALS, ARE YOU LEADING SCHOOLS WHERE TEACHERS WANT TO STAY?

I was a building principal more than 25 years ago, and I'll be the first to admit that schools have changed a great deal since then. There was no TikTok or Instagram for teachers to compete with, and the thought of students bringing cellphones to school never crossed our minds. But some things haven't changed for educators, including this fact: Teachers who feel appreciated and supported are more likely to stay in the job and the profession.

Principals have always played a key role in that equation. As the authors of the report *How Principals Affect Students and Schools* (Grissom et al., 2021) pointed out, effective principals are skillful at retaining effective teachers, in part because they build strong relationships with teachers and build a productive school climate where the focus is on instruction. I would also argue that effective principals use professional learning to strengthen teachers' understanding of and commitment to school goals and initiatives and to build their expertise in ways that entice teachers to want to stay in their school or district.



Leveraging professional learning in this way requires intentionality, and Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) offer significant guidance for leaders. The standards didn't exist in their current form when I was a principal, but as I reflect on my own practice, I feel I was living them in spirit. I believe three standards in particular contributed to high levels of teacher retention in my school.

Professional Expertise: *Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators apply standards and research to their work, develop the expertise essential to their roles, and prioritize coherence and alignment in their learning.*

Although some people view expertise like earning top-tier status on their favorite airline — once it's achieved, nothing more needs to be done — I never thought of it this way. As the standard makes clear, educators need to pay attention to new research and emerging best practices to achieve and maintain expertise. I believe that authentic experience of expertise was vital for the teachers in my school.

Expertise without implementation, however, is like a fancy car that doesn't go anywhere. It's not enough to be an expert if the students don't benefit. In my building, I believe our focus on implementation also contributed to my staff's success.

Implementation: *Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators understand and apply research on change management, engage in feedback processes, and implement and sustain professional learning.*

More than once during my principalship, the district or school administration introduced new curricula, instructional materials, or expected practices. Sometimes it felt like we were in a constant state of change, and that can be frustrating for teachers. However, when managed intentionally and effectively, the change process can create even stronger commitment among the staff. One way to do this is by honoring and addressing teachers' concerns. I also worked with my staff to put our own mark on new strategies and resources in a way that incorporated their

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voices and benefited students and our building’s culture. As a result, teachers felt the professional learning or change was something that was being done with them, not to them.

The third standard — Leadership — may seem an obvious choice, but it’s helpful to understand how it contributes to teacher retention.

Leadership: *Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators establish a compelling and inclusive vision for professional learning, sustain coherent support to build educator capacity, and advocate for professional learning by sharing the importance and evidence of impact of professional learning.*

This standard applies to a broad range of individuals across the education system, including those who do not have the word “leader” in their titles. I was not the only leader in my building. Grade-level chairs, content experts, and even students saw themselves as leaders and as part of creating and maintaining the vision of collective efficacy and mutual success. As a result, they not only felt a sense of loyalty and a desire to see the changes carried through, they also could see a long-term career path for themselves.

I take pride in the way my staff and I collaborated to grow and improve and that we had high levels of retention and satisfaction. This is a reflection of everyone’s hard work and intentional commitment, not just mine. But I

understood — and welcomed — the responsibility I had to create the conditions for that culture to grow.

As Jason Grissom and colleagues stated in their report, “Principals who are successful at retaining teachers take a proactive approach and focus on teacher growth, including building opportunities for teachers to collaborate.” I encourage all school leaders to take that message to heart.

REFERENCES

Grissom, J.A., Egalite, A.J., & Lindsay, C.A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools.* The Wallace Foundation.

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aspirations, skills, attitudes, and behaviors — with her districts to assist them in beginning their professional learning plans.

Evidence: Jones uses a wide range of data points in designing the learning for the educators she supports. She uses surveys, polls, and protocol tools to gather information about her districts’ progress. This allows her to gauge where they are in the process of developing a professional learning plan as well as determine any remaining gaps in knowledge. In addition, Jones focuses heavily on data use with her districts, helping them set goals and determine the data sources and systems they can use to monitor progress. She is building the capacity of her districts to determine meaningful ways to evaluate their work.

Learning Designs and Implementation: The districts in Jones’s region are identifying the learning designs most appropriate for ensuring that

their educators progress to full implementation of new instructional practices. The state provides the structured literacy training that the districts will use, so the focus for Jones and the educators she supports is to design the job-embedded follow-up for each district tailored to its level of capacity to support teachers. One of Jones’ goals is to create a coherent system for how districts develop their professional learning plans by building foundational knowledge in high-quality professional learning, change management, and implementation sciences.

Culture of Collaborative Inquiry: As Jones works to drive the networks model into her region, her goal is to create an environment where educators work smarter, not harder, so that they are doing less but more effective work. Collaboration helps leaders and staff move toward this goal. Because districts are collaborating around similar problems of practice, they help each

other access resources and ideas from districts across their region. In her next convening, Jones will use a structured protocol that allows districts to partner in a consultancy-type space to problem-solve around their progress. This kind of collaboration also helps the leaders build a culture of collective ownership for all of Ohio’s students.

The Ohio Department of Education has committed to improving student learning, particularly in literacy, across the state. That doesn’t mean all districts are approaching the work in the same way. Ohio has given school districts local control, which means that they are all approaching their challenges in ways that suit their contexts. The network model is essential because it allows districts to learn from and with each other by sharing what is working and what is not. By leveraging Standards for Professional Learning to guide their work, Ohio educators are engaging in meaningful learning and growing their practice for the benefit of students across the state. ■