



We need to rethink time to support curious and imaginative teachers to become even better versions of themselves and nurture even more curious and imaginative students.

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EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ISN'T ABOUT HOURS

As a professional learning scholar and practitioner, I long for the day when a teacher doesn't ask me, "How many credit hours do I get for attending this training?" Usually, the question comes from an educator who has not had the opportunity to consistently experience high-quality professional learning, which researchers have defined as a collaborative and active learning experience that is job-embedded, offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and is sustained over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2022).



Despite my frustration at the question, I have empathy for the educators who ask it. I know what it's like to feel perpetually short

on time, not only as a classroom teacher, but as a facilitator, as I have often been asked to lead transformative professional learning in a fraction of the time I thought was necessary.

The challenge of overcoming time limitations to ensure high-quality professional learning is significant for all of us, regardless of our roles. The hard truth is that, even though there is ample research that substantiates the need for ongoing time for professional learning, we are often asked to function within less-than-optimal conditions for our collective success. As a result, it's not surprising that when teachers walk in the door, they want to know how much credit they will earn for their time. If it's unclear whether they will be granted enough time to learn, they will understandably focus on checking off compliance requirements.

This is a cycle that's not easy to disrupt. To do so, leaders need to make sure we're focusing on the right goals and asking the right questions. Determining how much time to dedicate to professional learning isn't about finding the magical number of hours. It's about identifying our beliefs about professional learning and placing a high value on ongoing formal and informal learning opportunities for all educators.

The questions we should really be asking are these: Are we willing to invest in professional learning to make meaningful differences in our schools? Are we willing to invest time in building educators' capacity to serve all students equitably? Are we willing to invest energy in cultivating a learning culture? Are we willing to invest resources to retain educators by supporting their professional growth?

Our answers aren't just about professional learning. They are about how — and how effectively — we approach education's enduring problems. We can't solve the challenges facing our schools without addressing the initial preparation and ongoing development of the educator workforce. Brooks and Brooks (2021) remind us that, "Student learning in school happens with and through the daily work of teachers. There are no shortcuts; there is no teacher proofing of schools. Curious and imaginative teachers empowered to be master learners serve as powerful guides for curious, imaginative students" (p. 143). We need to rethink time to support curious and imaginative teachers to become even better versions of themselves and nurture even more

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curious and imaginative students.

Now is a great time to think differently about how we use time. My colleagues and I at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching are reimagining an educational landscape that is not bound by restrictions placed on educators and students because of the Carnegie Unit. The concept of the unit was developed in 1906 as a measure of the amount of time a student has studied a subject, and it has been used since then to determine how many credits students earn toward graduation. Much has changed since 1906, and in concert with others in the field, the Carnegie Foundation understands that learning in today’s world is not simply a function of students’ seat time in a classroom. As a corollary, teachers’ growth is not simply a function of the hours clocked in a professional learning session.

This is an important shift, and one that doesn’t necessarily happen quickly or easily. As a field, we haven’t made this shift in professional learning at scale yet. But we do have innovative models of professional learning not based on seat time, many of which

Learning Forward has espoused for decades, that we need to continue to practice and spread. They include instructional coaching, professional learning communities, and teacher action research, all of which center relationship building, collaboration, inquiry, and direct connections to the daily work of educators. Learning the methods of each model requires skill development, time, and flexible scheduling, but research continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of making those investments (Blazar, 2020; Nelson et al., 2008).

Here are questions every systems leader can ask to begin to separate professional learning from the traditional notions of time:

1. How is professional learning defined and measured in this system?
2. How is current professional learning rooted in relationships and inquiry?
3. What evidence is needed to demonstrate teacher learning?

Answering these questions and making changes doesn’t have to take generations. We collectively determine the pace of change, and we can start right now. The good news is that we

don’t have to finish the journey today. What is required of us today is to take one step away from the status quo and toward changes that rebuild the professional learning system to ensure our school communities become learning organizations for students and educators.

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conversations about what this will look like, what it will take, what the benefits will be, and how to move away from low-impact areas of focus. This strategy of focusing has many benefits for schools, students, and educators, including allowing teachers to have some space to take care of themselves and feel successful with the practices they are focusing on.

School leaders are essential to making these shifts. But principals are stretched thin and often feel like they are just keeping their heads above water. Leaders should reflect on what pulls them away from the things that

only a leader can do, like getting into classrooms regularly to provide feedback. Then make a proactive plan to reduce, eliminate, or delegate those things that are getting in the way. Even reducing those things by 10% will make a difference in your work and the day-to-day functions of the school.

It’s important to recognize that doing things differently does not happen overnight. Be patient with yourself and your colleagues, and take one step at a time. When we let go of how we’ve done things in the past and set clear goals and action plans for

the future, real change happens. And the absolute best way to help teachers feel well and whole at school is to help them be successful.

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