



PERSPECTIVES ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Tracy Crow

Learning Forward is fortunate to work with stakeholders in a range of roles and from all kinds of contexts, including schools and systems, higher education, teacher associations, foundations, government, and corporations. While the people we work with cover a lot of ground in and beyond education, we have the luxury of focusing deeply on this singular challenge: What can we know about — and do about — what it takes to build the capacity of educators to be their very best?

Focusing on professional learning doesn't mean, however, that there isn't a lot to explore: the science of learning, cultures in schools, contexts and conditions, holding professional learning to high standards, measuring impact, identifying the elements of effective learning, the role of technology, dedicating appropriate resources, the roles of educators in professional learning, creating effective sys-

tems, to name a big handful.

A wonderful aspect of serving as the professional learning association for educators is the opportunity Learning Forward has to hear about the great work people are doing in this field. While we typically use *JSD* to explore a topic in some depth, sometimes we just want to share valuable stories and words of wisdom from a variety of perspectives. As we head into 2016, we ask you to consider these broad questions.

What big goals do we have for our school or system this year, and what role do we expect professional learning to play in achieving that goal?

Sadly, in too many systems, professional development is a box to be ticked. The days are set aside by policy, law, or tradition, and educators do their best to endure their inservice days. Meanwhile, those same educators are tasked with achieving some extremely ambitious goals.

What will it take for all systems to connect the dots so that the learning on the calendar and the goals in the

strategic plan align? Schools have progressed considerably on this front. Read “Beyond professional development” on p. 42 for a glimpse into how professional learning has evolved. Consider what next steps you’ll take in your evolution on this question.

How will we know if professional learning makes a difference?

Setting ambitious goals for learning is one essential step in planning. Another is considering what learning strategies will meet the needs of the particular learners in the room. Yet another is integrating support for follow-up and coaching to ensure full implementation. Finally, however, educators must build in mechanisms for knowing if the learning made a difference, both for educators and students.

“Make a path for evaluation” on p. 30 offers several considerations on this topic. Fully understanding the impact of professional learning is a complex task. Still, educators at every level can take steps to monitor their progress and assess the outcomes they achieve against the goals they set for learning. Schools and systems must foreground this question so they’ll know whether they are making wise investments along the way.

How are we ensuring that learning is grounded in the real work of teaching and learning in schools?

Teachers are implementing rigorous content standards, and their needs are likely quite specific, just as their students’ needs are quite specific. Consider how learning connects teachers with the content they teach and the strategies they’ll use to reach students whose needs cross a very wide spectrum.

In this issue, read about the rich discussions teachers have as they clarify exactly how they’ll approach specific lessons in “Words matter” on p. 20. At the same time, keep in mind what school and system leaders need to know to achieve their highest priorities. How will principals, for example, gain the knowledge and skills to help teachers improve? You’ll find one pathway in “Do you see what I see?” on p. 12 as principals collaborate to calibrate how they evaluate teachers.

How we are creating not only structures for learning but also the culture and capacity to leverage those structures?

Educators don’t have enough time to learn — there are no advocates for professional learning who would disagree with this. Time, however, is not the only critical missing element in schools. Educators at every level need skills to use their time in valuable ways. As you’ll read in “The 5 habits of effective PLCs” on p. 24, effective learning community members know how to collaborate. Just as important, they do it within a culture that values learning for all and that ties learning to a clear purpose.

How are we engaging educators at every level to create and sustain a culture of continuous learning?

As the school and district articles in this and other issues of *JSD* demonstrate, when teams of professionals join together around shared purposes and challenge themselves to improve, they deliver results for students. Consider what is happening in your learning context to elevate educator voices and educator needs. How do those needs inform learning designs, cultures, and structures?

What else do we need to know to create effective professional learning systems?

As Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh writes at the end of this issue, not everyone who has the responsibility to lead professional learning has the opportunity to become an expert in it before they take the reins. The field deserves serious study, and not just by researchers in universities — though we’ll ask for more of that, too. Reflect on what it would mean for you to develop more expertise in the field, whether for yourself or others. What areas of learning would best support your efforts to influence how professional learning happens in your context?

While the articles in this issue don’t answer all of these questions, we hope they provide fodder to spark your continuing journey to develop a rich body of knowledge about professional learning that results in positive changes for all the learners in schools.

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