



## **STRATEGY BRIEF:**

# Evaluating Professional Learning

AUGUST 2021

## Local education agency (LEA) and school leaders can use this brief to learn more about:

- Effective practices they can use to evaluate professional learning;
- Examples from other schools that have implemented strategies to address this challenge; and
- Resources to support this work in your LEA.

*To learn more about professional generally, see the Educator Professional Learning Guide.*

## Context

Professional learning is designed to the effectiveness and retention of teachers, as well as increase and sustain positive student outcomes. States are investing considerable resources in the development of professional learning opportunities.<sup>1</sup> One study suggested that nationally LEAs spend an average of \$18,000 per teacher, per year on professional learning efforts, and teachers spend nearly 10 percent of their time on professional learning activities. The effectiveness of these activities in improving teacher practice varies greatly, and many professional learning efforts do not yield observable improvements.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, evaluating professional learning activities and focusing on those that actually improve teacher practice can be critical for improving student outcomes.

To evaluate professional learning, we must first start by defining high quality professional learning. Effective professional learning is structured professional learning that is designed based on data, enhances teacher knowledge and practices, and improves student learning outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Table 1 includes the elements of effective professional learning. These elements focus on a continuous process that includes follow-up and is connected to learning objectives.

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**1** Ingvarson, L., Meiers, M., & Beavis, A. (2005). Factors affecting the impact of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice, student outcomes & efficacy. Education Policy Analysis Archives. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v13n10.2005>

**2** Jacob, A., & McGovern, K. (2015). The mirage: Confronting the hard truth about our quest for teacher development. Retrieved from [https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage\\_2015.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage_2015.pdf)

**3** Darling-Hammond, L., Hyer, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective\\_Teacher\\_Professional\\_Development\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf)

**TABLE 1. ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

ARCHIBALD, COGGSHALL, CROFT, & GOE (2011)	THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (2015)
<p>1. Aligned with school goals; state and LEA standards and assessments; and other professional learning activities, including formative teacher evaluation</p>	<p>1. Sustained: not a stand-alone, 1-day workshop</p>
<p>2. Focused on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content</p>	<p>2. Intensive: includes in-depth learning of specific concepts</p>
<p>3. Provides opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies</p>	<p>3. Collaborative: includes multiple people working toward a common goal</p>
<p>4. Provides opportunities for collaboration among teachers</p>	<p>4. Job embedded: learning directly connects to instruction</p>
<p>5. Embeds follow-up and continuous feedback</p>	<p>5. Data driven: includes analysis of data to meet the needs of learners</p>
	<p>6. Classroom focused: focuses on practices taking place during instructional time</p>

## Effective LEA policies and practices

This section describes a proposed six-pronged approach for evaluating professional learning. Each proposed component includes a description of the main questions it seems to answer and the type of measures that are used. The components are organized chronologically. Evaluating professional learning involves evaluation of the “event” or experience/activity as well as evaluating the impact on the theory of change.

### ***Step 1: Design the professional learning to be data-driven and job-embedded.***

Does the design meet the criteria for effective professional learning, such as being data driven and job-embedded (i.e. grounded in day-to-day teaching practice) and designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning? Clearly establish the purpose and intended outcomes of the program or activity.<sup>4</sup> Rather than viewing professional learning as just an “input,” such as courses taken by teachers, have a clear theory of change, where the program or activity improves systems or teachers’ knowledge, skills, beliefs, and/or practice as mediating factors that influence student learning.

Is the professional learning informed by the data at the LEA, school, classroom and student

<sup>4</sup> Wayne, A. J., Yoon, K. S., Zhu, P., Cronen, S., & Garet, M. S. (2008). Experimenting with teacher professional development: Motives and methods. *Educational Researcher*, 37(8), 469–479.

levels? Examine whether it is relevant for the specific school, teacher and student context. In addition, high need schools have unique characteristics, often including high rates of inexperienced teachers and fewer resources.<sup>5</sup> Professional learning evaluators can review whether professional learning is tailored and suitable for teachers in the most challenging conditions, so it can positively impact achievement gaps (e.g., professional learning that is focused on improving student attendance in high need schools that experience chronic absenteeism).

### **Relevant questions for evaluation include:**

- Is the professional learning activity evidence-based?
- Does it meet the criteria of effective professional learning (see Table 1)?
- Is the intervention reflective of addressing student needs at this particular school?
- Is the intervention addressing teachers' identified areas of need (i.e., as evident in teacher evaluation results)?
- Does it include follow-up activities?

Data collection tools to answer these questions could include checklists, rubrics, a review of professional learning documents, or interviews.

**Resource:** *The Learning Forward Standards Assessment Inventory offers the method used by Learning Forward to assess the quality of professional learning activities using the organization's standards. The inventory is not open access and requires engagement with Learning Forward.*

**Resource:** *In a comprehensive report TNTP, The Mirage suggests that professional learning as currently implemented is ineffective in improving student outcomes and makes recommendations that may be used to evaluate professional learning activities.*

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<sup>5</sup> Mizrav, E., & Lachlan-Haché, L. (2019). Flipping the readiness paradigm: Tailoring programs to address the achievement gap and teacher shortages in high-need schools. Washington, DC: Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. Retrieved from [https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/Mentoring\\_Induction\\_High-Need\\_Schools.pdf](https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/Mentoring_Induction_High-Need_Schools.pdf)

# Reflection question:

- *How do our LEA and school professional learning opportunities align with best practices?*

## **Step 2: Design the evaluation to use timely feedback for continuous improvement.**

Evaluate the immediate feedback that teachers provide following the professional learning activity. Measuring immediate feedback can be useful in learning about the quality of delivery, the relevance of the content to teachers' practice, teachers' level of engagement in the professional learning, the effectiveness of the professional learning format (e.g., webinar, group meetings, coaching), and teachers' perceived ability to deliver new skills in the classroom.

### **Questions for evaluation include:**

- Did participants find the experience useful?
- What components did participants find more relevant to their practice?
- Did the participants feel that the professional learning will improve their practice?

Measures that could provide information on these questions include teacher surveys, interviews, focus groups, or exit tickets.

**Resource:** *For questions useful in considering how to measure contextual factors for evaluating professional learning (e.g. How do teachers access professional learning? Does the evaluation system help identify professional learning needs identified at the classroom, grade, school, or district level? Are evaluation results linked to specific and targeted professional learning offerings?), a valuable resource is the American Institutes for Research's "Linking Teacher Evaluation to Professional Development: Focusing on Improving Teaching and Learning". In this paper researchers examine the features of effective professional learning and outline the process of connecting professional learning to teacher evaluation.*

**Resource:** *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Professional Development Self-Assessment Guidebook and Rubric includes a guidebook and rubric to evaluate the quality of professional learning. The evaluation has three domains: (a) alignment to grade spans, content areas, and curriculum priority areas; (b) alignment to the elements of effective teaching practice; and (c) alignment to the Massachusetts high-quality professional learning standards.*

# Reflection Questions:

- *How has professional learning been evaluated in your LEA historically?*
- *How can that experience inform future evaluations?*
- *What positive results have there been?*
- *What lessons have been learned?*

## **Step 3: Consider the effects of participant learning on desired changes.**

Merely evaluating participant reactions to professional learning activities does not show the skills and knowledge that educators gain from the professional learning or the ultimate goal to improve the identified outcomes for which the professional learning was intended. In designing the evaluation, consider evaluating the actual knowledge and skills that teachers acquired. Compared with surveys or interviews for gathering feedback, this component includes more formalized assessments, like observations or portfolio reviews of targeted teacher groups (e.g. veteran teachers in need of improvement, teacher leaders). The evaluation could ask what participants learned in the professional learning activity or what new skills they acquired. Example measures for these questions include knowledge assessments, skill demonstrations (e.g., reviews of lesson plans or classroom observations that apply learning from the professional learning), or participant presentations.

**Resource:** *The Florida Professional Development System Evaluation Protocol Reviewer's Guide, pages 36-39, provides guidance on evaluating whether professional learning has led to changes in educator practice and student learning.*

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#### ***Step 4: Consider how the system supports the effectiveness of professional learning.***

Evaluate not only teachers' acquisition of new skills, but also how well the school/LEA system enables them to apply their new skills. For example, did professional learning that focused on lesson planning include strategies for principals to schedule time for teachers to plan together and was such time actually allocated? Thus, the school and LEA systems share ownership of the professional learning's impact by adjusting systemwide factors as needed.

#### ***Questions for evaluation could include:***

- Were proposed changes to teaching practice supported at the school and LEA levels?
- Were sufficient resources made available by the school and LEA (e.g., time for planning, sharing and reflection)?
- Were successes recognized and shared?

Example measures that could provide information on these questions could include an analysis of LEA or school records, interviews with participants and school leaders, or teacher and leader surveys.

#### ***Step 5: Examine how professional learning supports the use of new knowledge and skills.***

Evaluate the actual change in teacher practice that can be observed following the professional learning, in both the short and long terms. For example, following a professional learning that focused on a new technique for teaching fractions, classroom observations will check whether this new technique is now embedded in instruction. Results from this stage can inform planning for additional or follow-up professional learning activity.

#### ***The evaluation could include questions such as:***

- Did instruction improve as a result of the professional learning?
- Are the skills acquired in the professional learning used to guide instructional practice?

These questions could be measured by a review of lesson planning practice, classroom observations, or student surveys.

### EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



The Georgia Pre-K PD Evaluation Study evaluated the impact of professional learning focusing on teacher-child interactions. The study used measures such as observations and teacher surveys to compare teachers receiving different types of professional learning. The methods and results could be reviewed for examples of components to include in a professional learning evaluation model.

## Reflection questions:

- *How would measuring the implementation of professional learning differ from measuring the knowledge participants gain?*
- *What data sources would be feasible for the LEA to collect?*

### **Step 6: Explore the impact of professional learning on student outcomes.**

Evaluate the impact of the intervention on student learning by examining student academic and other outcomes. To close gaps, review whether the positive or negative outcomes applied to different types of schools and students—not just the average of all students—and particularly whether they benefited high need, lower performing students.

### **Questions for evaluation:**

- How did the professional learning activity impact student learning?
- How did it impact inequities in student experiences/outcomes?

LEAs can answer these questions using examples measures such as student surveys; attendance; behavior; and cognitive indicators of student performance and achievement (e.g., portfolio evaluations, grades, and summative, formative, benchmark and diagnostic assessments).



These components can provide meaningful layers of evaluation and shed light on different strengths and weaknesses of the professional learning. Although it is challenging to trace changes in student learning to one intervention, evaluating all components can improve the ability to do so.

### EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



The Council of Chief State School Officers analyzed the evaluations of 25 math and science professional learning programs in fourteen states and published the results in a 2008 report. The evaluation data submitted and analyzed for this report included programs that looked at impact on teacher knowledge, instructional practices and student achievement. Information on the professional learning programs included in the report can be found on this form.

**Resource:** For LEAs focusing on measuring the impact of educator professional learning on student learning, “Reviewing the Evidence on How Teacher Professional Development Affects Student Achievement” is a comprehensive report from the U.S. Education Department’s Institute of Education Sciences. In the paper there is a review of the effectiveness of educator professional learning for student achievement. The methodologies highlighted can be helpful to LEAs developing a plan for measuring the impact of professional learning on student learning outcomes.



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