



Student outcomes are the driving force behind professional learning decisions

Planning for effective professional learning proceeds in this sequence: What do students need to know and be able to do to achieve? Given that information, what knowledge and skills do educators need? Finally, what should professional learning address, and how should it be organized to ensure educators attain the necessary knowledge and skills?

However, too frequently, professional learning planning looks like this: Develop a needs assessment survey for educators to take, and

organize professional learning according to the priorities that surface from the survey.

What is wrong with the second sequence? Some teachers may think they need to learn more about differentiated

instruction, and some principals may think they need to learn more about schoolwide discipline strategies. But without first examining students' needs and identifying the related knowledge and skills staff need, selecting a professional learning focus can be arbitrary rather than deliberate.

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In the second sequence, planning begins with the educator. In the first sequence, planning begins with the student. In education, student success is our end goal.

I have a friend whose son works for a major manufacturing company. He boasts about his opportunity to go to culinary school as his professional development. Fortunately, he also participates in on-the-job training to support his role in the finance department. The money spent on his cooking classes has little to do with his company's profitability. The company explains its investment as an investment in the welfare of its employees.

I wish we had the option to prioritize the welfare of our employees as well as our students when it comes to professional development decisions. With increasingly fewer resources to support educators, we must make wise choices about how we spend them, driven by the outcomes we expect for our students.

The idea that professional learning planning begins with what students need to know and be able to do is so simple, but often neglected. Instead, school systems and professional development committees may defer to such things as results from needs assessments, individualized planning processes leading to independent requests for support, the next new thing that will be the answer to all ills, or the availability of speakers on a particular date.

Guided by such thinking, systems then decide to devote precious professional learning resources to:

- Team-building field trips rather than deep analysis of data;
- Course requirements rather than job-embedded collaborative learning;
- Stress management rather than subject-specific learning;
- External consultants rather than expertise that may reside within the school; and
- Fragmented individualized professional learning plans rather than team and schoolwide planning aligned to student and teacher data.

The Outcomes standard leaves no room for such choices. The purpose of professional learning is to ensure that all students successfully meet the standards determined necessary for their success. Educator performance standards establish the link to student standards. And professional development standards define the conditions and processes necessary to ensure that educators are able to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need.

In the early years of my career, professional development was touted as a professional benefit for me as an individual. Today, professional learning is a professional responsibility. Without a commitment to it, it is highly unlikely any school system, school, or individual will be able to help all students achieve rigorous standards. ■

