



Professional learning vs. PD: THE DISTINCTION MATTERS

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For most professional learning facilitators, this is a familiar scenario: A district invites us to present during a back-to-school professional development day, assigning us to a breakout session slot following a general session keynote address. We work with the educators for a short time — maybe

45 minutes, maybe three hours — and then we never see them again. We hope we've made a difference, but we have no way to know for sure.

When this scenario occurs, we recognize that the district's request is well-intentioned and that educators value the support. But research and experience tell us that these kinds of

professional development activities rarely result in desired shifts in educational practice and increases in student achievement because they are disconnected from educators' day-to-day work and do not provide ways for participants to integrate what they learn into ongoing practice.

Part of the reason many districts fail

to achieve the promise of high-quality professional learning is that they operate with what we call a “PD mindset.” This mindset manifests in sporadic, one-time events, inservice sessions, guest speakers, webinars, and workshops that are not part of a larger plan or vision.

Typically, even when they are grounded in research, these activities do not align with school goals, promote educator voice and agency, encourage learning in community, or respond effectively to students’ and teachers’ needs. Ultimately, a PD mindset attempts a quick fix or offers a small dose of content that is not sufficient to stimulate a change in thinking or practice or address systemic issues.

As university partners who collaborate with school districts, we believe that education leaders and learning designers need to shift from this *PD mindset* to a *professional learning mindset*, in which professional learning and growth are centered around accelerating personal and collective learning and closing the knowing-doing gap for leaders and teachers. We draw on the work of scholars, researchers, and practitioners who promote evidence-based professional learning practices as described in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

Shifting mindsets requires reframing the purpose for professional learning and educator support. In part, this shift will include moving from *delivering information* to intentionally *co-designing, with educators, learning and growth opportunities* that are grounded in the evidence about what is most needed and most effective.

HOW ONE SCHOOL SHIFTED TO A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MINDSET

Student achievement at Riverglen Elementary (a pseudonym) was in the bottom 10% of the state. When none of the 5th-grade students achieved proficiency in writing on the state assessment, school leaders knew they needed to do something differently.

They recognized that improving student writing proficiency meant setting shared goals and building teachers’ instructional capacity vertically in grades K-5. In August, the literacy coach, with principal support, introduced the faculty to several research-based writing strategies.

However, in January, students’ writing scores hadn’t increased. School leaders realized that teachers were not consistently implementing the new strategies, so they reached out to our university-based center for help with implementation.

We worked with Riverglen leaders to use a professional learning approach grounded in Learning

Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning. In this process, teachers and school leaders developed a shared vision for how they would collaborate in professional learning communities, planned collaboratively for implementation of the writing strategies supported by coaching, engaged in ongoing feedback cycles, participated in lab class learning designs, and used student learning data to ensure effective implementation and continuous improvement of instructional practices.

Three years later, teachers were implementing the strategies more effectively, and an impressive 83% of 5th graders were proficient in writing. The principal attributed students’ success to leaders and teachers developing a professional learning mindset and understanding how the standards could be enacted to result in student learning gains.

To make the shift in mindsets, school and district leaders must reconsider how their school vision aligns professional learning with student achievement goals, be clear about their “why,” and engage in critical self-reflection about how their own experiences with professional learning influence current practices.

They must commit to building their own skills, knowledge, and awareness of the components and qualities of effective professional learning so they can foster this growth in others. And finally, they must consider how evidence is used to track implementation and outcomes.

In our work with districts, we have seen that when school and district leaders make the shift in mindset from

PD to professional learning, they create and facilitate more effective learning designs, and professional learning becomes more aligned and coherent. The content becomes more relevant, job-embedded, and responsive to students’ and schools’ immediate needs.

Teachers have more regular opportunities to diagnose and respond to student learning needs through approaches like lab classrooms and coaching. Educators begin collaborating to create a shared vision, construct detailed implementation maps, and co-design professional learning plans and feedback systems to monitor their progress.

Ultimately, they make changes to their instructional practices that improve

COMPARISON OF A PD MINDSET TO A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MINDSET	
Ineffective approach designed with a PD mindset	Effective approach designed with a professional learning mindset
<p>Leaders attend a workshop for one full day, listen to a presenter tell them about the standards, read the standards in groups, identify and connect the key ideas, then consider how the standards can be applied in their context.</p> <p>Leaders are encouraged to continue reading the standards and related resources on their own after the workshop.</p>	<p>Leaders attend four two-hour sessions with a team of colleagues and a facilitator focused on engaging in the foundation for standards as a pathway to student improvement, deepening knowledge about each standard and how the standards are interconnected, applying the standards to each context, and reflecting on enactment of the standards in context.</p> <p>Facilitators use interactive study with expectations for including each person, foster collaborative inquiry, facilitate creation of journey maps for implementation, and lead group reflection. They also collect data on leaders' engagement and understanding and later reflect on the facilitation moves they used.</p> <p>Leaders' learning is sustained through follow-up sessions for cohorts of learners, check-ins, and repeat series for new cohorts with facilitators from previous sessions.</p>

and accelerate student learning. (See sidebar on p. 57 for an example of how one school we worked with made the shift from PD to professional learning.)

HOW TO MAKE THE SHIFT

Shifting from a PD mindset to a professional learning mindset takes an intentional systems approach, where those designing professional learning must consider that the “whole is more than just the sum of its parts” (Koffka, 1963).

Such an approach should draw on the well-established characteristics of effective professional learning, such as having sustained, ongoing structures for collaboration, coaching, and feedback with opportunities for active engagement to learn about specific instructional strategies or curriculum (e.g., Archibald et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001).

Recent research shows that professional learning aligned with these characteristics and other elements of Standards for Professional Learning is associated with improved teacher instruction, leading to increased student

achievement (Foster, 2022; Learning Forward, 2022; Garrett et al., 2021; Labone & Long, 2016; LeFevre et al., 2019).

Standards for Professional Learning provide a framework for shifting from a PD mindset to a professional learning mindset by emphasizing interrelationships among the conditions, processes, and content rather than seeing professional learning as a series of stand-alone, isolated activities.

To understand and apply the standards, leaders at the state, district, and school levels must *experience them*, not just intellectualize or listen to others talk about them. They must have opportunities to engage in meaningful professional learning that embodies and models the standards. To illustrate what this does and doesn't look like, the table above compares two professional learning designs for examining the standards — one effective and one ineffective.

Shifting from a PD mindset to a professional learning mindset takes time, intentionality, and an investment

in learning. We recommend that leaders aiming to facilitate this shift focus on the following components:

- Establish a shared vision of professional learning;
- Review evidence of current professional learning approaches;
- Identify a compelling “why” for professional learning;
- Develop self-awareness about professional learning experiences and perceptions;
- Examine knowledge about high-quality professional learning, including Standards for Professional Learning;
- Cultivate skills in facilitating standards-aligned professional learning;
- Identify active learning processes to engage adult learners; and
- Encourage language that focuses on learning and improvement and discourage language about training and workshops.

The table on p. 59 explores each of these components, including questions to pose and actions to take.

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HOW TO SHIFT FROM A PD MINDSET TO A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MINDSET		
Ideas to consider	Questions to ask	Actions to take
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is our current vision for ongoing teacher learning to support and accelerate student improvement goals? 	Examine the district's or school's vision for student achievement and the degree to which it is aligned with the professional learning plan.
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the current professional learning plan resulting in changes in leadership and teaching practices and ultimately increased student achievement? 	Collect and analyze current evidence about implementation of the professional learning plan (e.g., student achievement data, exit tickets, surveys, observations).
Compelling why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why shift to a professional learning mindset? 	Begin conversations about the potential benefits of shifting to a professional learning mindset (e.g., use a sentence starter, "We need to shift to a professional learning mindset because ...").
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have I ever experienced meaningful professional learning? 	Take time to reflect using a five-minute write. List the positive experiences you've had with professional learning and how it changed your practice. Write a sentence or two about your current understanding about the difference between PD and professional learning.
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do I know the difference between professional development and professional learning? Do I understand Standards for Professional Learning? Do I know how adults learn? 	<p>Study Standards for Professional Learning, using an approach similar to the one described in the table on p. 58.</p> <p>Engage in conversations about adult learning theories and what you know about them (e.g., andragogy, self-direction, experiential learning, reflection).</p>
Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do I know how Standards for Professional Learning are operationalized? Do I know the difference between facilitating and presenting? 	<p>Identify and reflect on how you enact the standards (e.g., by using the Learning Forward Standards Action Guides with Innovation Configuration maps).</p> <p>Compare how you present and how you facilitate. Explore how you know when to do one or the other to support adult learning.</p>
Congruency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do I recognize when professional learning experiences are designed and facilitated using active learning processes for adults and not just using a presenter "transmission" model? 	At your next professional learning session, notice trends in adult engagement, such as how much time the participants talk compared with the facilitator.
Language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do I use vocabulary associated with professional development or professional learning? 	<p>Listen for words that indicate a PD or professional learning mindset.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PD: training, workshop, guest speaker, famous name without a link to what will be learned. Professional learning: outcomes, implementation, data, support for follow-up, experience, facilitation, equity, and standards.

Professional learning vs. PD: The distinction matters

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FOSTER CULTURES OF LEARNING

When leaders shift their mindsets from “professional development” or “PD” to “professional learning” and use Standards of Professional Learning as a guiding framework, they are better positioned to foster powerful professional cultures of learning.

As their own learning is accelerated, they are better equipped to support teacher capacity building, which is the first step toward cultivating a culture of practice where educators are actively engaged in and set the course for their own professional learning.

In this way, educators and leaders can make sustained changes in practice that have meaningful impacts on their students’ learning and lives.

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