# Planning Professional Learning

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With backward planning, schools can ensure that they choose professional development activities aligned with their most important goals.

One of my favorite films is The Emperor's Club, starring Kevin Kline as Mr. Hundert, the Western Civilization teacher at St. Benedict's Academy. In the film's opening scene, the headmaster of the school stands before the assembled student body explaining the meaning of the school motto, Finis Origine Pendet: The End Depends Upon the Beginning. "What you accomplish in life and the significance of your contribution," he counsels, "will depend largely on what you do here. How you begin determines what you will achieve."

As the film unfolds, we see this poignant message revealed in the lives of the students. What they do at the school and the relationships they develop powerfully affect the kind of persons they become and the nature of the lives they eventually lead. In the end, we realize that Finis Origine Pendet is the film's central message.

The same is true of professional learning for educators. What it accomplishes and the significance of its contribution depend largely on how it begins. This holds true not only for traditional forms of professional learning—seminars, study groups, workshops, conferences, mentoring, coaching, and so on—but also for "new" forms that include face-to-face or online professional learning communities, teacher exchanges, bug-in-the-ear coaching, data teams, individualized improvement plans, and unconferences. The effectiveness of any professional learning activity, regardless of its content, structure, or format, depends mainly on how well it is planned.

## A Mixed History

Unlike many fields that have a history of steady improvement built on a continually expanding knowledge base, professional learning for educators has a mixed history at best. Sure, we have occasional success stories based on anecdotal evidence. Case studies here and there depict experiences that participants considered "effective" because these experiences offered useful ideas or were relevant to their on-the-job responsibilities. What we do not have, however, is strong and convincing evidence from activities and programs implemented in diverse contexts that resulted in better practice and improved student learning (see Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007).

Some critics argue that this lack of strong evidence stems from a general absence of purpose (Frechtling, Sharp, Carey, & Baden-Kierman, 1995; Guskey, 2003). For decades, schools have implemented professional learning not knowing exactly what they hoped to accomplish. Without a specific purpose to guide their experiences, they often fall prey to clever consultants and adept entrepreneurs more concerned with what sells than with what works to improve student learning. Seduced by dynamic presentations and jazzy technology, desperate school leaders jump onto education bandwagons, committing scarce resources to strategies and programs based more on wishes and promises than on solid evidence of effectiveness.

Others counter that education researchers are at least partially to blame. They argue that the research community has failed to offer useful guidelines for "best practice" that would help improve the quality and effectiveness of professional learning activities. Even rigorous studies of programs designed to include the elements researchers have identified as essential to effectiveness—including inquiry-oriented learning approaches, a strong content focus, collaborative leadership, and coherence with school curriculum and policies—have yielded disappointing results (see Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). As a consequence, practitioners flounder in their efforts to develop high-quality professional learning activities.

One thing on which all groups agree is that professional learning experiences, whether group-oriented or individually structured, are rarely well planned. Consequently, they lack purpose, cohesiveness, and direction.

## The Activity Trap

When planning their lessons, many teachers become ensnared in a familiar trap: They concentrate on planning what they are going to do and what resources they will need. Their plans focus on activities, such as differentiated instruction, project-based learning, creative applications of technology, and hands-on strategies. The resources they think about include materials, time, classroom arrangements, and technology requirements.

Those who plan professional learning experiences often do exactly the same thing. They plan for processes, not for results. They ensure that the activities in which participating teachers will engage are job-embedded, contextually relevant, and perhaps based on results from the most recent teacher-needs survey. What's lacking is a clear notion of the purpose of those activities. Why are we doing this? What do we hope to accomplish?

Planning in this way is like choosing the route for a journey before deciding on the destination. The route is important, of course, and numerous factors come into play when making that choice. You must decide, for example, what means of travel will be most efficient or enjoyable, how much time is available, and what to see along the way. But if your goal is to reach a particular destination, decisions about the route must come after identifying that destination. The format and content of professional learning activities are vitally important and must be thoughtfully addressed. But just as you must decide a journey's destination before you can determine the best route, you must clarify the goals you want to achieve in terms of better educator practice and improved student learning before you can judge the value, worth, and appropriateness of any professional learning activity.

## A Better Approach: Planning Backward

In the past, I've written about five crucial levels of evidence to consider when evaluating professional development activities: (1) participants' reactions to the activities, (2) participants' learning of new knowledge and skills, (3) organizational support and change, (4) participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and (5) student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2000, 2002). The levels are ordered from simple to more complex. Because each level builds on those that came before, success at one level is necessary for success at each higher level, and no level should be neglected in the evaluation process.

When it comes to planning professional learning, the order of these levels must be reversed. In other words, because our primary goal is to improve student learning outcomes, planning must begin with clarifying those outcomes. This means we must plan backward, beginning where we want to end and then working our way back to the processes that will get us there (Guskey, 2001; Hirsh, 2012). The order of steps for professional learning planning thus becomes (1) student learning outcomes, (2) new practices to be implemented, (3) needed organizational support, (4) desired educator knowledge and skills, and (5) optimal professional learning activities.

## 1. Desired Student Learning Outcomes

Before thinking about the format and content of any professional learning experience, we must first consider the specific student learning outcomes we want to attain and what evidence will best reflect those outcomes. As Covey (1989) stressed, we must "begin with the end in mind."

These decisions require careful analysis of current student achievement data. Results from large-scale assessments, common formative assessments, and individual classroom assessments can show areas where students might be struggling. School records can identify behavior problems related to attendance or discipline. Classroom observations and discussions with students often help pinpoint areas of concern. Interviews with teachers, focus groups, or discussions with professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004) are especially valuable when identifying persistent trouble spots that we need to address to help all students master complex concepts and skills.

Planners can gain additional insights by analyzing the performance of subgroups of students, in particular the learning progress of students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ability levels, language experiences, ethnicities, races, and genders. Looking at differences among classrooms and between schools often yields new understandings of problem areas as well. For example, suppose that state assessment results in two neighboring schools show that students in one of the schools have difficulty constructing descriptive or persuasive essays. In conversations that professional learning planners facilitate among the faculties from the two schools, teachers discover that the higher-scoring school's formative assessments include items that require extended written

responses in all subject areas and that students receive specific feedback on their writing and targeted assistance in making improvements. Teachers in the other school decide to explore whether adopting these practices will make a difference.

It can sometimes prove tricky to decide what evidence best reflects achievement of student learning outcomes, because not everyone trusts the same evidence (Guskey, 2012). Research indicates that the perspectives of administrators and teachers can differ significantly on this point. Administrators tend to perceive nationally normed standardized assessments, state assessments, and district assessments as more valid indicators of student learning than teachers do. Teachers grant more validity to classroom assessment results, classroom observations, homework completion and quality, and students' class participation and behavior than administrators do (Guskey, 2007). Therefore, it is usually best to consider multiple sources of evidence.

Some educators contend that improving student learning outcomes represents too lofty a goal for many professional learning activities. Those in education service agencies and state or district offices, for example, often indicate they are too far removed from classroom interactions to expect their efforts to consistently reach that level. Because of this distance, they should only be accountable for providing evidence that the professional learning activities they plan and coordinate improve educators' knowledge and skills.

But if these professional learning activities increase educators' knowledge and skills but result in no change in school or classroom practice and no improvements in student learning, would we consider these activities successful? In almost every instance, the answer is a resounding "No!" So even at these levels, planning needs to begin with discussions of intended effects on student learning.

## 2. New Practices to Be Implemented

The next step in planning professional learning is to decide what instructional practices and policies are most likely to produce the student learning outcomes we want. At this stage we need to ask questions such as, How do we know these particular practices and policies will produce the results we hope to achieve? How good or reliable is that evidence? Was it gathered in contexts similar to ours? Is it the kind of evidence we consider most important?

In deciding what new practices to implement, we must be particularly cautious of popular instructional innovations that are actually more opinion-based than research-based. We need to be willing to challenge consultants who preface their statements with the phrase, "Research says … " by asking, "What research?" And we should expect detailed answers with specific citations that we can verify.

Most important, we must recognize that trustworthy research is unlikely to come from blogs, newspaper articles, Google searches, or social media sources like Twitter or Facebook. Instead, we must look to credible sources of research, such as the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), an online library of education research and information sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, or JSTOR (short for Journal Storage), a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. Look specifically for publications that are refereed, meaning that experts in the field have reviewed the articles and judged them as sufficiently rigorous to yield trustworthy results. Journals of the American Educational Research Association, particularly Review of Educational Research and Review of Research in Education, can be especially valuable. Before jumping on any education bandwagon and committing scarce time and resources to it, we must make sure that sound evidence validates our chosen approach.

## 3. Needed Organizational Support

After identifying the desired practices and policies, we need to ensure that we put in place the organizational supports that are necessary to implement them well. Many valuable improvement efforts fail miserably because of a lack of active participation and clear support from school leaders (Guskey, 2004). Others prove ineffective because schools have not provided the resources required for implementation. Even the best professional learning experiences will be ineffective if teachers don't have the time, funding, instructional materials, or necessary technology to use their new knowledge and skills.

Another essential but often neglected aspect of organizational support is feedback to teachers on the results of their efforts. Teachers are reluctant to persist in implementing new practices in the absence of evidence that what they're doing makes a positive difference. Therefore, it's important to build some mechanism into the implementation process to show teachers that these new practices are working.

The most valuable feedback to teachers is regular, specific, and based on trusted measures of student learning. Because teachers have the most confidence in evidence they gather themselves, results from classroom formative assessments provide an ideal feedback source. Classroom observations by school leaders, coaches, or fellow teachers can offer another excellent resource. Even if the change is uncomfortable at first and requires extra work, most teachers will continue their implementation efforts if they see positive student results.

## 4. Educator Knowledge and Skills

With the issues of organizational support addressed, professional learning planners must decide what specific knowledge and skills educators need in order to implement the prescribed practices and policies well. In other words, what must educators know and be able to do to successfully implement the new practices and bring about the sought-after improvements in student learning?

Determining the needed knowledge and skills requires consideration of both the what and the why of professional learning. Participants must develop sufficient depth in their knowledge of new practices so that they can adjust these practices to fit the nuances of their particular context while maintaining program fidelity. At the same time, they must understand the rationale behind the change.

For example, planners may decide that student learning in all subject areas could be improved by having teachers offer more specific and more prescriptive feedback to students on classroom assessments. Extensive research shows that better feedback helps students learn from their mistakes, remedy the errors they have made, and become more self-regulated learners (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). To use this strategy successfully, however, teachers must know how to construct high-quality assessments, how to provide prescriptive feedback to students, how to engage students in effective corrective activities following assessments, and how to provide students with a second chance to demonstrate what they have learned. In addition, teachers need guidance and direction on how to implement these strategies in practical, time-efficient ways in specific classroom environments.

## 5. Optimal Professional Learning Activities

Only after making all of these other crucial planning decisions should we turn our attention to the question, What set of experiences will best enable participants to acquire the needed knowledge and skills? Seminars and workshops can be a highly effective means of sharing information and expanding educators' knowledge and skills, especially when paired with collaborative planning, structured opportunities for practice with feedback, and follow-up coaching. Action research projects, organized study groups, collegial exchanges, professional learning communities, online services, and a wide range of other group and individual activities can also be effective, depending on our identified goals for student learning.

## The Benefits of Backward Planning

It should be evident that the decisions we make at each level of this professional learning planning process profoundly affect those we make at the next level. For example, the particular student learning outcomes we want to achieve directly influence the kinds of practices and policies we need to implement. Likewise, the practices and policies we decide to implement have a direct bearing on the kinds of organizational support or change required, and so on.

The context-specific nature of this work complicates matters further. Even if professional learning planners agree on the student learning outcomes they want to accomplish, what works best in one context with a particular community of educators and a particular group of students might not work equally well in another context with different educators and different students. This is what makes developing examples of truly universal "best practices" in professional learning so difficult. What works always depends on where, when, and with whom. But if we begin with the end in

mind and plan backward, we can take many of those context-specific elements into consideration, making success much more likely.

High-quality professional learning is the foundation on which any improvement effort in education must build. But to be successful in those efforts we must plan backward, beginning with the student learning outcomes we want to affect. From there we can consider what new practices and policies can be implemented to achieve those goals, the organizational support required, the knowledge and skills educators must have, and optimal professional learning activities that will help them gain that knowledge and skills. Our success in the end will depend on how we begin.

## A Backward Planning Case Study

Teachers in Springfield High School find that some students do not prepare adequately for formative assessments when they know they'll be offered a chance to retake the assessments. The teachers believe this lack of preparation leads to students' poor performance on both the formative assessments and subsequent summative examinations. When they discuss the problem in their professional learning community, the teachers discover that none of them has found a satisfactory solution. They pose the problem to a Twitter chat group and an online professional learning community and receive differing responses, many of which recommend negative consequences for students who perform poorly on the initial assessment (for example, limiting the grade students can attain on the second assessment, permitting a second assessment only occasionally and at the teacher's discretion, or making the second assessment more demanding). Finally, they turn to research on the topic and find strong evidence that offering rewarding, challenging enrichment activities for students who do well on an initial assessment can enhance students' motivation.

With extra time for planning provided by their administration, the teachers explore a variety of resources for viable enrichment activities and find many options among materials prepared for students considered gifted and talented. Several teachers experiment with various forms of enrichment, conduct action research, and discover amazing success with several approaches, especially when students are allowed to choose or develop their own enrichment activities. Not only do the teachers see improvement in students' motivation, but they also note significant gains in students' performance on both formative assessments and cumulative summative examinations.

The teachers share their successes with colleagues in their own professional learning community and report back to the Twitter chat group and online professional learning community. They also present their results at a regional teachers' conference and prepare a short article on what they did for a teacher magazine, imparting their ideas to a broad audience of teacher colleagues who will use those ideas to enhance the learning of their students.

In this case, the teachers started with a goal based on student learning outcomes and planned backward. They used a systematic approach to professional learning that helped them find a workable solution. They acquired the necessary organizational support, developed the knowledge and skill they needed through various activities, and gathered meaningful evidence on the effectiveness of their solution. Finally, they shared what they learned with the larger professional community.

Author's note: Springfield High School is a pseudonym.

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