

Best Practices in Professional Learning: Surrounding Educators with a System of Support

By Susan Vincent | Categories: Professional Learning

What does powerful, effective professional learning look like for educators? What best practices and support structures create the ideal conditions for teacher learning?

Whether you're a novice or veteran educator, you've likely experienced professional learning opportunities meant to help you increase student achievement. You may have felt their power in your own practice—or perhaps you've felt a need for more support in helping your students reach success.

Teachers experience a wide array of approaches to supporting professional growth: from programs that provide scripts but not much else to one-day sessions for an entire school that may not relate directly to each teacher's daily practice.

Too often professional learning can feel haphazard or one-size-fits-all. Like Goldilocks, teachers crave that just-right level of scaffolding—and a system of support tailored to meet their unique needs—that lifts their knowledge of literacy theory *and* shows them how to put it into practice.

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Key Characteristics of High-Quality Professional Learning

We are fortunate to have a body of recent research to inform us about best practices in teacher learning. The research guides us in answering two important questions:

- What are the key characteristics of high-quality professional learning?
- What support structures benefit teacher learning the most?

Let's start by exploring the key characteristics of effective, high-quality professional learning.

Aligns Closely to Teachers' Everyday Work

The professional learning content being presented should be applicable to what teachers do in their classrooms. This may mean differentiating the professional learning opportunities offered to the teachers in a building.

For example, some teachers may need support in teaching decoding skills in small groups. Others may need help in establishing routines for classroom discussion. Offering one-size-fits-all to both groups might meet no one's needs. But offering aligned professional learning that helps solve specific problems of practice would be time well spent for everyone.

Not only is related content engaging to teachers, it is also a powerful chance to apply theory in meaningful contexts. Offering teachers support in the specific areas that directly impact their daily work makes professional learning relevant and timely.

Promotes Collaboration Between Teachers

The best learning structures promote collaboration between teachers. Collaboration feels good. It makes you feel less alone and lets you know you have support. It also lifts the learning of all participants as ideas are shared or problems are examined. There are many ways to incorporate collaboration into professional learning.

One example is Lesson Study, a collaborative process of planning, teaching, observing, and discussing a lesson with colleagues. Teachers who have experienced Lesson Study often describe it as a favorite way to learn. The process allows them to put heads

together to think about what works or doesn't work with lessons they actually teach.

This type of discussion and collaborative problem-solving is especially effective and authentic as it centers around actual classroom practices, curricular resources, and the results with students.

Continues as Long as Needed

The duration of the professional learning should be ongoing for as long as is needed. One-off workshops or PD days are usually not enough to create sustained change. We have probably all seen curricular resources not used to their full potential because of lack of ongoing support for teachers. The opportunity to apply what is learned and then reconvene to problem-solve is valuable.

We certainly expect other professionals, like doctors or engineers, to continue learning in their field. Teachers are no different. Growth happens over time, so pulling away support too soon is a mistake.

Supported by High-Quality Curricular Materials

We wouldn't expect a knowledgeable chef to cook a great meal with dull knives. We also wouldn't expect the finest meal from a novice chef, even if they had the sharpest of knives. Knowledge, skill, and the most effective tools are needed to be successful in your craft.

The same holds true for teaching. High-quality, aligned curricular resources partnered with outstanding professional learning opportunities will create the perfect scenario for student learning. On the other hand, without the right curricular resources, the power of professional learning is blunted.

High-quality resources can even help us become more knowledgeable as we teach with them. Well-written teaching guides can increase teachers' content knowledge and provide rationales for pedagogy.

For example, if a resource calls for "continuous blending" in decoding (rather than having readers articulate sounds with 'stops' in between) and explains this technique within the manual, teachers will learn the research behind the most efficient way to teach decoding. Educative curriculums promote growth for children *and* teachers.

Allows Active Participation

The most relevant professional learning allows active participation and encourages learning from self-reflection. Many of us have likely experienced long sit-and-get sessions or PowerPoint presentations that went on a bit longer than our attention spans. Even as eager learners, it's hard to learn this way. But if we have the chance to explore lessons together or analyze our own teaching, the relevance exponentially increases our engagement.

The success of this active, self-reflective learning depends on creating an environment where educators feel safe and supported. When we try anything new, we will make some mistakes. Mistakes are the best opportunity for learning as long as we have the freedom to reflect on them safely. Adult learners should be respected with opportunities that encourage inquiry based on their particular context and the safety to learn from experience.

What Support Structures Benefit Teacher Professional Learning the Most?

While the above characteristics are essential for teacher professional learning, it is in the *interaction* of these characteristics that true learning takes place.

This leads naturally to our next question: which structures create the best conditions for these characteristics to take root and teacher learning to flourish?

We carefully consider structures when we help children learn. *Should the learning happen in whole-group, small-group, or one-to-one? How often should the instruction occur? How much practice?* We consider students' needs in making these decisions. Designing teacher learning requires the same careful considerations.

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Two well-researched structures for adult learning are **professional learning communities** (PLCs) and **instructional coaching** models.

Both are job-embedded, can incorporate the key characteristics of effective professional learning, and most importantly, are based on relationships between educators.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities meet regularly with a focus on teacher and student learning. This structure is helpful as an ongoing way to ensure teachers can collaborate around problems of practice in their classrooms and help each other with all students.

Often members of a PLC will identify a common area of need in their students or an area of their teaching they'd like to focus on. Working together, they might focus their learning on possible teaching strategies, try them out, and then monitor student learning over time.

Instructional Coaching Models

Instructional coaching models allow teachers to get individualized, targeted help with their teaching. We've all expressed the need to have an extra set of eyes or ears as we teach. A coach can be those extra eyes and ears on our students, helping us see teaching and learning from a fresh perspective.

Coaching is not an evaluative practice. It's a supporting role. A teacher may ask a coach to help them use more effective instructional language. Or a teacher may ask a coach to help them problem-solve lesson timing.

Because it's so contextualized, coaching is especially effective in helping teachers connect their professional knowledge with their curricular resources to create the most responsive teaching.

Careful decisions about the type and level of ongoing professional learning provided to teachers result in better learning opportunities for children.

Deepen Your Professional Learning with Us

Here are a few helpful resources with information about how to best nurture effective, high-quality professional learning and surround teachers with a system of support.

- Download our white paper *Surrounding Teachers with a System of Support*, which summarizes the most current research on professional learning.
- Read the blog post *What Is an Educative Curriculum?* and explore what it means for a curriculum to be "educative" for teachers.