

# Three Lessons Learned from the Pandemic about Professional Learning

By Elizabeth Foster | Categories: Professional Learning



Professional learning is integral to Collaborative Classroom's mission of empowering educators, transforming the school experience, and developing students. We're delighted to publish this blog post co-authored by **Elizabeth Foster** of Learning Forward, **Judy Newhouse** of Learning Forward Virginia, and **Isabel Sawyer** of Collaborative Classroom.

The global COVID-19 crisis has not only had a huge impact on student learning but on teacher learning. "Teachers are education's first responders," mathematician John Ewing wrote recently in *Forbes*, and we are learning every day how to respond even more effectively. What have we learned during the pandemic about professional learning and how can it help us improve professional learning for the future?

First, we have learned the importance of *tying professional learning directly to timely student needs*. While many learning leaders have always done this, last spring's shift to online learning made clear how quickly needs can change and why we need to offer teacher learning based on those priorities.

For instance, teachers have had to respond to student needs as diverse as navigating online instruction, connecting with peers, and discovering their intrinsic motivation. We must continue to support teachers with the skills and content they need right now, especially to directly address student learning, including any potential learning loss students may be experiencing as a result of COVID.

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One way to respond to student needs is to offer experiences for teachers that mirror the supportive and differentiated experiences we want for students. For example, students desperately need relationships and contact with peers their own age. Similarly, we need to respond to the social and emotional needs of teachers and prioritize relationship building in our professional learning.

Many educators are creating and sharing with their colleagues ways for students to build relationships with others during online

learning. Some are opening their video conference rooms early so that students can gather before the instruction, and some are even hosting Zoom recess! To mirror and model this commitment to connection, some professional learning leaders are establishing daily collaboration between teachers within and between schools. (It's important to ensure those opportunities align with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning and that they are collaborative, targeted, ongoing, and reflective.)

Second, we have recognized that we must provide space and time for *learning that teachers need and want*. Educators have been reaching out on their own to find webinars, online resources, and the informal advice of colleagues to quickly respond to the new realities of teaching. School leaders can learn from this and focus on teacher engagement by offering opportunities for teachers to share their voice and exercise choice. Offering optional but interesting and engaging professional learning in several different ways, both live and recorded, will not only attract but inspire educators to learn and grow during this isolating time.

Let's spend some time digging into long-range goal planning, for the rest of the COVID-influenced period of time but also beyond. We might want to revise our learning goals for this year and discuss our learning goals for next year. We can create new plans that recognize and encourage teams of teachers to participate in the myriad external learning opportunities that educational organizations are now offering.

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One of the areas in which teachers want and deserve support and time is self-care and well-being. They want and need time to learn how to reduce stress so they can take time to pause and reflect, and so they can manage all that they have on their already full plates. Processes such as coaching, learning communities, mentoring, building and restoring relationships have the potential to enhance and support the well-being of teachers and school leaders. We have learned to ask an important question during the COVID school closings that we need to continue to ask ourselves: *Does professional learning add to workloads, or does it empower teachers and school leaders to be valued, autonomous professionals?*

Third, we have learned about the value of *creating different designs for learning*. It seems as if there are unlimited opportunities and online resources these days, and going virtual provides us with many new potential configurations for accessing effective professional learning. Educators can access webinars from professional learning providers from all over the globe. Schools, where possible, are providing one-on-one online or telephone support. Social media platforms in which teachers, school and system leaders, and education organizations share resources, processes, and learnings have become more robust.

As a result of these new opportunities, professional learning has taken on more of a job-embedded "learning as we go" approach in many places. The rapid expansion of learning opportunities is a positive development that should continue beyond the pandemic.

However, we must acknowledge that the sheer number of resources can be overwhelming and that learning at home may create a new set of challenges, such as with focus and multitasking. Professional learning leaders should curate resources, support educators in matching outcomes to learning goals, and provide guidance about how to focus the learning experience.

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This upcoming school year will be different than ever before. Now is the optimal time for teams to regroup, connect, define, revise, or re-envision the work ahead to emerge stronger than before.

Let's attend to student needs and support teachers in addressing student learning loss and new designs for learning. Let's focus on

building cultures of trust, collaboration, and vibrant conversations. Let's give teachers the space, time, and resources to identify and improve their knowledge, skills and understandings.

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