

TEACHSTRONG POLICY PROPOSAL: PRINCIPLE 8

DESIGN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO BETTER ADDRESS STUDENT AND TEACHER NEEDS

#TEACHSTRONG

THE NINE TEACHSTRONG PRINCIPLES

PRINCIPLE 1

IDENTIFY AND RECRUIT MORE TEACHER CANDIDATES

PRINCIPLE 2

REIMAGINE TEACHER PREPARATION

PRINCIPLE 3

RAISE THE BAR FOR LICENSURE

PRINCIPLE 4

INCREASE COMPENSATION

PRINCIPLE 5

PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR NEW TEACHERS

PRINCIPLE 6

**ENSURE TENURE IS A MEANINGFUL SIGNAL
OF PROFESSIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT**

PRINCIPLE 7

**PROVIDE TEACHERS WITH MORE TIME, TOOLS,
AND SUPPORT**

PRINCIPLE 8

**DESIGN PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING TO BETTER
ADDRESS STUDENT
AND TEACHER NEEDS**

PRINCIPLE 9

CREATE CAREER PATHWAYS

THE TEACHSTRONG THEORY OF CHANGE

The TeachStrong coalition has adopted nine principles we believe must be put in practice in order to modernize and elevate the teaching profession. This policy proposal from the TeachStrong coalition explains how we can design professional learning to better address student and teacher needs, and to foster feedback and improvement. This proposal builds out Principle Eight, the eighth of the nine TeachStrong principles. Although this proposal addresses just one principle, the nine principles affect and build upon one another and must be aligned to achieve systemic changes to the teaching profession.

Thoughtful changes across the teaching career continuum are necessary to improve teaching and learning for all students—especially students of color and those from low-income families. While higher expectations for students and schools have heightened the demands placed on teachers, the systems that are designed to support teachers have not kept pace. These gaps are especially apparent in high-need schools.

This campaign seeks to promote changes that span a teacher’s career, starting with recruitment and preparation and continuing on through compensation and career pathways, paying particular attention to the importance of the professional context in which teachers work. The TeachStrong coalition believes that all aspects of the teaching profession must be addressed in a systemic way; only then can we create a self-reinforcing cycle through which the status of the profession is raised along with the quality of teaching and learning in our nation’s classrooms.

We need a comprehensive approach to addressing the teacher pipeline because we have seen that piecemeal policy changes do not work. In the past, there have been attempts to address singular aspects of the teacher pipeline, and while these efforts may have made significant changes to one area, the system as a whole remained largely unchanged. For example, if we were to focus solely on preparation programs, it might give beginning teachers a stronger start. But student learning will not significantly improve if teacher training and development are ineffective or if teachers do not have opportunities to lead. In combination, however, changes in these areas could have powerful, lasting effects. Moreover, if we are to ensure that great teaching consistently reaches all students, we must explicitly address inequities in access to our strongest educators for low-income students and students of color.

No one simple policy fix will be enough to move the system as a whole. Many of the institutions responsible for educating, training, and setting policy for teachers operate in isolated silos that are sometimes disconnected from teachers themselves. The work is not easy: Policymakers must strive for a comprehensive system while factoring in other realities, such as existing political landscapes and the unique situations and contexts of individual states. However, as demonstrated by the consensus achieved by the diverse TeachStrong coalition around these nine principles, success is possible.

To achieve the kinds of dramatic changes we need for student achievement—and for those changes to be sustainable for teachers, students, and taxpayers alike—we need dramatic changes to all aspects of the systems designed to support teachers.

TEACHSTRONG POLICY PROPOSAL: PRINCIPLE 8

Design Professional Learning to Better Address Student and Teacher Needs and Foster Feedback and Improvement

“He who dares to teach must never cease to learn.”

– JOHN COTTON DANA¹

MOST PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS CURRENTLY FAILING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF TEACHERS

The best professional learning for teachers helps them acquire, practice, and apply new skills to better serve their students.² But despite annual investments of \$18 billion by federal, state, and local agencies into professional learning for educators, many teachers still do not receive the kind of professional learning that helps them grow and improve their practice.³ Less than one-quarter of teachers say that they have changed their instruction as a result of professional learning, likely in part due to the lack of a consistent professional learning strategy across states and school districts.⁴ Learning Forward, a nonprofit association dedicated to supporting professional learning for educators, contends that the current state of professional learning is one of “inertia.”⁵

Though some districts are beginning to change their models, much professional learning still comes in the form of one-time workshops.⁶ Too often, such short-term professional learning opportunities do not allow for time to practice and ongoing feedback. Without high-quality, sustained, individualized support, teachers cannot meaningfully incorporate what they have learned through professional learning programs and reflect on and grow their teaching skills.⁷ As a result, one-time workshops rarely have a noticeable effect on student learning, especially when teachers cannot choose which workshops to attend or when the activity fails to engage teachers in active and applied learning.⁸

One critical component of well-designed professional learning is educator access to thorough and actionable feedback.⁹ Such feedback should be provided through formal and informal observations by principals and peers trained in how to constructively assess teaching practice.¹⁰ However, a 2008 nationally representative survey of more than 1,000 teachers found that only one in four teachers reported that their principal’s most recent evaluation was useful and effective.¹¹ Forty-one percent of teachers said that their evaluation was “just a formality,” while another 32 percent deemed their most recent evaluation “not particularly helpful” to improving their teaching practice.¹² Similarly, a recent national survey found that just more than half of teachers consider evaluation feedback “minimally or not at all helpful.”¹³

Furthermore, teachers are often too strapped for time to meaningfully engage in a cycle of growth. A recent survey of more than 30,000 educators found that teachers consider time pressure an “everyday stressor” more than any other potential source of stress, including disciplinary issues and problems with supervisors or colleagues.¹⁴ Without time to

collaborate, apply new skills, and make improvements based on actionable feedback, teachers cannot fully engage in a professional learning system that supports continuous growth.

While there are some promising results from specific programs,¹⁵ researchers contend that most professional learning interventions have done little to affect student learning.¹⁶ Others say that professional learning for educators has a “mixed history” at best.¹⁷ And though some well-developed professional learning communities, or PLCs, have been shown to improve teaching practice and increase student achievement, recent research raises troubling questions about whether many commonly used professional learning strategies have yielded positive results in the United States.¹⁸ A recent New America report states that most professional learning is “not relevant to teachers, does not provide teachers opportunities to practice and receive feedback, and does not allow sufficient time for teachers to fully develop new skills or knowledge.”¹⁹ The data are clear: Teachers need professional learning that is crafted with intention and precision and backed by evidence of both teacher and student growth.

In contrast with the incoherent attempts at professional learning often seen in school districts across the United States, many other countries prioritize professional learning for their teachers. These countries ensure that teachers have the time and training necessary to collaborate effectively with their colleagues to improve instruction. In Singapore, for example, teachers have 20 hours per week scheduled to work with colleagues, including time for “action research,” through which teachers identify and solve shared problems through discussion and classroom experimentation.²⁰ Research suggests that professional learning in many high-performing countries tends to yield positive results when it is part of a larger school effort, rather than a patchwork of isolated activities not connected to school-level goals.²¹

Professional learning benefits teachers the most when it addresses a specific need or problem. According to a recent survey, 9 in 10 state teachers of the year rated self-selected professional learning as “very important” to developing their effectiveness as a teacher.²² However, most professional learning in the United States is not meeting the needs of today’s educators, who must teach to higher standards and increased student needs. The challenge is even greater in many schools where educators may not have other content or grade-level teachers with whom to collaborate on a regular basis. Stephanie Hirsh, executive director of Learning Forward, said, “I am not surprised that someone would call effective professional learning a mirage at this point. It is incredibly frustrating that too few teachers are experiencing the learning that would help them offer the best teaching to our nation’s children.”²³ The nation must reimagine the system for teachers’ professional learning to ensure that teacher development serves teachers and students alike.²⁴

PROVEN QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR TEACHERS

Effective professional learning begins with a focus on student learning goals and a clear understanding of the desired student learning outcomes. Because what works in one district may not work in every district, professional learning should be aligned and adapted to address school and system goals.²⁵ States and school districts should work with teachers to design ongoing cycles of learning and improvement that ensure all educators can identify areas for growth and learn evidence-based strategies that will address their needs, ultimately improving their performance and increasing student achievement.²⁶

While all teachers need high quality systems to support their growth, professional learning for new teachers, especially during an induction process, should be distinct from professional learning for their more experienced peers. Professional learning for beginning teachers should give these educators chances to practice new skills. Meanwhile, professional learning should support veteran teachers as they strengthen existing skills, teach new subjects, or implement shifting standards and novel technology.²⁷ Professional learning for veteran teachers should assist these educators in achieving increasingly accomplished practice, and train them in providing support, coaching, and professional learning to novice teachers.

“I am really looking for professional learning for the ‘more advanced’ teacher. I don’t need a session on how to use an iPad. I need an in-depth session on increasing differentiation within my classroom. I also think our view of professional learning is very limited; I would love for it to include visiting and reflecting on other classroom practices.”

– AMANDA ZULLO, High school chemistry teacher and TeachStrong ambassador, Saranac Lake, New York²⁸

There are certain skills that all teachers need, including managing behavior, using student data to guide instruction, differentiating instruction, and teaching literacy. Therefore, professional learning should incorporate training on classroom competencies, pedagogy, and curricula—all with teachers’ unique contexts in mind. Some schools have increased student achievement by providing professional learning that addresses pedagogical techniques in more specific, content-based topics related to teachers’ grade levels and subject areas.²⁹

There are several organizations dedicated to supporting schools in this endeavor. For example, the Public Education and Business Coalition, or PEBC, operates on the premise that—just like students—teachers desire professional learning that considers engagement, learning design, and teachers’ unique qualities.³⁰ PEBC’s professional learning system includes workshops and institutes, classroom-embedded modeling and coaching, and opportunities to observe accomplished teachers in lab classrooms.³¹

Similarly, the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education, or NAATE, which provides specialized professional growth opportunities for educators, works to retain teachers and school leaders through opportunities to grow in data-driven instruction techniques, peer leadership, and communication and feedback.³² Building on past successes via its network of teacher leaders in 185 sites, the National Writing Project’s, or NWP’s, College Ready Writers Program demonstrated that teacher leaders will commit to and participate in high quality professional development that helps them strategize approaches to teach argument writing using nonfiction text and provides adaptable classroom materials. The College Ready Writers Program resulted in statistically significant improvement in student writing.³³

The ability to provide teachers with actionable feedback is not an innate skill; school leaders and mentor teachers must be taught how to provide such feedback.³⁴ Like all good coaches, school leaders and teachers who lead professional learning need training. Principals' and teacher leaders' professional learning should involve opportunities to practice new skills and give immediate, thorough, and data-driven feedback.³⁵ Some school systems have invested in specialized coaching for teacher leaders in developing and delivering high-quality, actionable feedback.³⁶ With the support of professional development providers, such as Teaching Matters in New York City, these districts now recognize teachers who have mastered providing feedback as a component of professional learning with "micro-credentials" or "digital badges."³⁷ Likewise, national nonprofits, such as Digital Promise and the Center for Teaching Quality, provide teachers with online professional learning communities and opportunities to achieve micro-credentials.

To improve the overall impact of professional learning in the United States, Learning Forward has developed seven Standards for Professional Learning that define the research-based attributes of effective professional learning for educators that increase student achievement.³⁸ The standards were developed in collaboration with nearly 40 national education organizations and have been adopted or adapted into state policy in more than 30 states. Participating states and school districts must now effectively monitor the implementation of these standards.

- 1. Learning communities:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.
- 2. Leadership:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.
- 3. Resources:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.
- 4. Data:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students and uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.
- 5. Learning designs:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.
- 6. Implementation:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.
- 7. Outcomes:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

Time is a critical component of successful professional learning systems, but school leaders and teachers often do not have enough of it.³⁹ Teachers need time to apply new ideas in their classrooms, reflect with peers, and adjust their practice to fit the needs of their classrooms. When teachers have the necessary time to engage in high quality professional learning—coupled with the supports to use that time well—such professional learning can result in marked improvements in student academic growth.⁴⁰ This is why the National Education Association’s Foundation for the Improvement of Education includes “adequate time for inquiry, reflection, and mentoring” as one of the components of high-quality professional development.⁴¹ When teachers have time to plan, practice, collaborate, and learn, both teachers and students benefit.

High-performing countries as well as successful programs within the United States offer frameworks for professional learning that better support educators and ultimately improve student outcomes. High-performing countries prioritize teacher learning and provide teachers with collaboration time to boot, which translates to higher student achievement scores.⁴² Within these systems, effective professional learning is viewed as the ideal method for improving student learning.⁴³ In order to truly support our nation’s teachers and students, the nation must establish evidence-based professional learning systems that ensure that teachers have continuous opportunities to grow.

HOW EXCELLENT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CAN MODERNIZE AND ELEVATE THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Strengthened professional learning can play a powerful role in modernizing and elevating the teaching profession. Developing excellent professional learning systems is critical to both recruitment and retention for schools and districts, and an important lever to ensure that educators are growing and supported at every step of their career. Effective professional learning requires collaboration among teachers—within schools and school districts, and even across communities—which in turn benefits students.

Teachers who are part of strong professional learning communities feel less isolated, more supported in their day-to-day work, and more confident and satisfied with their jobs.⁴⁴ Teachers need opportunities to consult colleagues, discuss complex teaching challenges, reflect on their professional practice, and share what works. These professional conversations are critical for helping teachers improve their practice. School cultures that foster collaboration and openness to feedback ensure that teachers have opportunities to create solutions and improve student outcomes, cultivating more professional work environments.

New teachers, especially, can benefit from better professional learning. First-year teachers often feel underprepared when they first enter the classroom, and are less likely than more experienced teachers to report being well prepared to implement state or district curriculum.⁴⁵ As a result, nearly one in seven new teachers leaves the classroom before completing their third year, with most citing classroom management, the burden of curriculum freedom, and unsupportive school environments as their greatest stressors.⁴⁶ Too often, teachers begin their careers in a sink-or-swim situation, with little to no formal induction or support system and inadequate professional learning.⁴⁷ By providing new teachers with evidence-based professional learning—including through comprehensive, high-quality induction programs—schools and districts can create a more supportive pathway to success in the classroom. This on-ramp can help ensure that new teachers are experiencing the learning they need in order to succeed. Especially in high-need and hard-to-staff schools, helping beginning teachers thrive is critical to retention.

In excellent professional growth systems, experienced and mentor teachers with exemplary teaching skills can apply their expertise and agency to design improved professional learning and create positive school cultures. By creating opportunities for accomplished teachers to foster and support personalized professional learning that fits the needs of teachers and schools, districts can leverage the knowledge and expertise of their best teachers, which is currently underutilized in the creation of professional learning.⁴⁸ Schools and districts can simultaneously create robust career pathways for excellent teachers and provide professional learning opportunities tailored to individual teacher needs.

Furthermore, by supporting career pathways, schools and districts can mitigate one of the primary reasons for teacher attrition: a lack of upward mobility in the teaching profession.⁴⁹ Mid-career teachers are especially interested in “hybrid teaching roles,” which provide teachers with leadership opportunities while allowing them to continue working with students part-time in the classroom.⁵⁰ An added benefit of hybrid teaching roles is that they expand the responsibilities inherent to a teacher’s career, enhancing how teachers are perceived as professionals and providing a rationale for higher teacher salaries.

“Ideally, professional learning is ongoing and continuous. It should model the practices that you expect teachers to use in the classroom. How can you provide “sit and get” to teachers and tell them to have an interactive classroom? How can you tell teachers to utilize technology in the classroom and you are reading a static PowerPoint?”

**– KIA MCDANIEL, ESOL instructional supervisor and TeachStrong ambassador,
Prince George’s County, Maryland⁵¹**

More and more, schools are seeking to retain teachers by creating collaborative cultures through professional learning communities, or PLCs; critical friends’ groups, or CFGs; or teams comprised of grade level or content teachers who meet daily to discuss teaching and learning, student progress, and share best practices. Research shows that when teachers work collaboratively, they can learn from each other, discuss problems, find solutions, and improve student learning.⁵² They are able to build a culture in which all educators—new and more experienced alike—share a strong sense of community and collective responsibility for student success.⁵³

Strong professional learning and growth systems are fueled by the expertise of accomplished teachers. Expert teachers can lead professional learning for their peers and strengthen the support new teachers receive so they can develop into accomplished practitioners. For example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was founded to elevate the teaching profession through defining and certifying accomplished teaching and mobilizing the leadership of accomplished teachers. Once they earn their National Board certification, these expert educators are well-equipped to lead professional learning and support other teachers seeking the same credentials. Students of National Board Certified Teachers learn up to two months more than their peers, with an even greater impact for students of color and low-income children.⁵⁴

A career continuum supported by a system of meaningful professional learning would put teaching more on par with other modernized professions such as medicine, engineering, and architecture.⁵⁵ Such a continuum should support every teacher to aim for accomplished practice from the start of their career, to work in school-based teams to demonstrate and improve their knowledge and skills, and to expand their impact as accomplished teachers through a variety of leadership roles, which would allow them to continue teaching students. By maximizing the reach of accomplished teachers, schools, districts, and states across the country are working to develop robust professional learning systems.⁵⁶

As demonstrated by high-performing countries that prioritize strong teacher pipelines, a focus on high-quality professional learning correlates with increased student achievement.⁵⁷ By addressing identified teacher learning needs, based on student learning data, schools and school districts can improve student outcomes. Teachers need relevant professional learning that provides them with new knowledge and guides them to improve their classroom skills. A focus on teacher growth and development can help grant teachers the time and space to implement successful teaching strategies and benefit from the expertise of accomplished teachers. Recent research demonstrates that teacher mentoring programs with intensive and regular observation and feedback and collaborative lesson and grade groups, are key to increasing active collaboration among teachers.⁵⁸

To promote cultures of continuous growth, schools and school districts should encourage and support feedback loops, honest coaching conversations, and collaboration toward improved student outcomes.⁵⁹ A recent report found that when teachers are more open to feedback, their evaluation scores are more likely to increase over time.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the introduction of new teacher evaluation systems in recent years has created an opportunity to provide teachers with much more effective feedback and to more intentionally target professional learning to individual teachers' needs.⁶¹ When professional learning is rooted in collaboration and meaningful opportunities to apply new skills, these systems can become essential components of evaluation systems that support teacher growth.⁶²

Creating a system of meaningful feedback allows teachers to design, review, and critique professional growth resources and activities, which can ultimately lead to more targeted investment in high-quality learning activities.⁶³ These activities should not be limited to just a teacher evaluation cycle; instead, professional learning should be a central component of school cultures dedicated to continuous improvement. By implementing comprehensive, holistic systems of regular growth and feedback, states, school districts, and schools can cultivate high-quality, research-based professional learning systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School districts, schools, school leaders, and teacher leaders should build structures and cultures that promote collaboration, openness to feedback, and continuous improvement

Professional learning systems should align to unique school contexts, and expert teachers should be involved in creating and implementing professional learning, such as observing and coaching colleagues. Professional learning systems should be sustained, intensive, and embedded in the day-to-day work of teachers. Additionally, teachers should have ample time to practice new skills and receive clear, actionable feedback on the implementation of the strategies they have learned.

School districts should promote professional learning opportunities that open the door to career pathways for experienced teachers: to help design and implement professional learning within their schools; to serve as consulting teachers and coaches for early career educators; and to serve as team leaders for collaborative school learning teams. Because feedback is a critical component of effective professional learning, schools and school districts should also increase the capacity of teachers and school leaders by providing training on the qualities of actionable, supportive feedback, and also ensure that teachers and school leaders have the time to give, receive, and incorporate feedback.

School districts and schools should identify high-quality professional learning strategies with evidence and data systems that track the effectiveness of professional learning

Districts should prioritize professional learning systems that have demonstrated marked success in the classroom and that respond to teachers' individual needs. School districts and schools should use a variety of sources and types of student and educator data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning. Districts, schools, and teachers should implement data systems to track the effectiveness of professional learning and ensure that only the best professional learning strategies are continued.

School districts, schools, and school leaders should prioritize professional learning for teachers that address unique student and teacher needs

Instead of short-term workshops, districts should collaborate with teachers to identify evidence-based strategies based on teachers' needs to ensure that teachers receive consistent feedback regarding which skills they should prioritize, along with the appropriate supports to implement new skills. School leaders can play a critical role in ensuring that teachers receive individualized professional learning and support, especially if they actively participate in observing teachers' performance and are well-trained in effective feedback strategies. Therefore, school leaders should set clear objectives and work to fit individual educator goals into alignment with overall school goals.⁶⁴ By promoting individualized, targeted, and consistent professional learning for teachers, school districts, schools, and school leaders can promote positive school environments in which student and teacher growth are prioritized.

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