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THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION
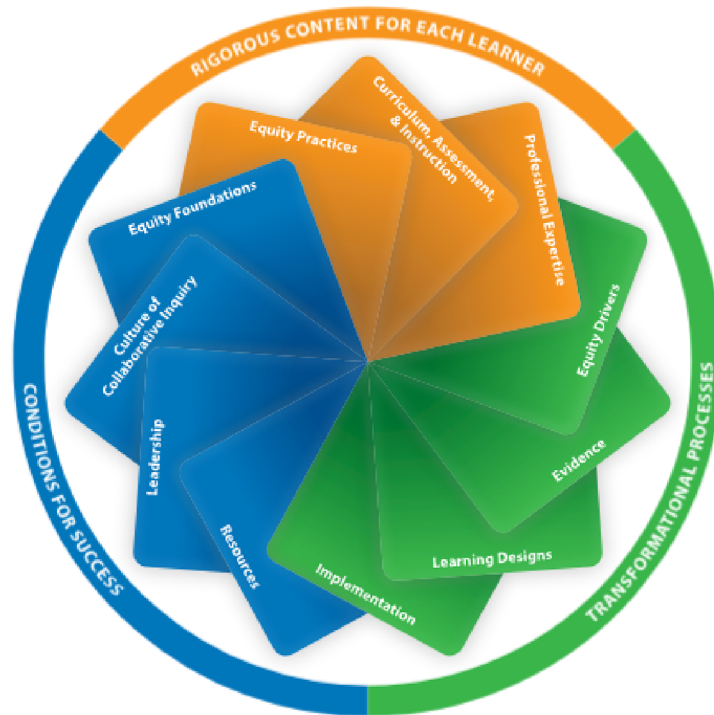
Standards
for Professional
Learning

LEARNING FORWARD

Culture of Collaborative Inquiry

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators engage in continuous improvement, build collaboration skills and capacity, and share responsibility for improving learning for all students.

When educators at every role, grade level, and content area collaborate for continuous improvement and support their colleagues' ongoing learning and development, they increase learning opportunities for each student. They simultaneously develop individual and collective knowledge and expertise and commit to collective responsibility so together they can better meet student needs.

Educators engage in strategic and consistent processes to develop the habits of mind and practices that make collaboration effective, and they embrace continuous learning as a shared responsibility and privilege. Collaborative learning is more than a particular design or format. Rather, it is a holistic approach to professional learning and a key contributor to a culture of sustained improvement.

Superintendents, principals, and leaders of professional learning establish expectations for collective improvement and protect time and resources that support ongoing learning. Leaders of professional learning become experts in collaborative inquiry and support their colleagues in using continuous improvement approaches and understanding their value. Educators in all roles commit to building their knowledge and skills to learn in concert, remaining open and curious about their students and colleagues, and supporting one another to achieve the goal of improved learning for all students.

Here are the main constructs of the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard.

Educators engage in continuous improvement.

Educators recognize that embedding continuous improvement structures and practices into their day-to-day work strengthens their knowledge and skills, especially related to their ability to collaborate to improve outcomes for all students. Educators use research, school and system goals, and professional expertise to identify the most relevant and promising collaborative continuous improvement approach and engage in professional learning related to the processes, expectations, and tools that will support them as they work toward shared goals and document, analyze, and improve their practices.

In the continuous improvement process, educators develop shared goals and then document, collaboratively analyze, and improve their practices, reflecting together along the way. They recognize that achieving long-term goals takes time, persistence, and trusting relationships as well as regular cycles of planning, learning, testing, data collection, and analysis.

Educators define a shared problem of practice based on relevant data and an understanding of their own context and challenges, such as addressing student learning variability, implementing curriculum, aligning content across courses, or strengthening instruction. Educators identify potential small-scale improvements to implement and test.

Learning from each continuous improvement cycle informs the next, as incremental changes lead to major improvements. Educators are comfortable with some uncertainty about the outcomes of the test they are about to undertake because they will look at the results together and reflect about success, failure, and any needed adaptations.

As their confidence in the learning process and in each other grows, educators become more transparent about their own learning and increasingly willing to make changes that raise and accelerate student achievement. Educators recognize that improvements are multiplied when they deprivatize their practice by sharing information about the results of any strategies they test. They open their doors literally and figuratively to invite observations by peers and constructive feedback dialogues about successes and challenges.

Educators understand that, individually and collectively, they influence student growth, and they believe that each improvement in their mindsets, knowledge, or skills leads to an improvement in student outcomes. They trust their colleagues will support them when they risk failure to test a new instructional strategy or acknowledge a blind spot in their approach to student learning. In turn, they support their colleagues as they do the same.

Educators build collaboration skills and capacity.

Professional learning increases educators' knowledge about the benefits of collaboration and strengthens their capacity and skills to collaborate. Together, educators identify, practice, assess, and refine the skills and practices that foster collaboration. They seek opportunities to practice collaborative skills such as active listening, ensuring parity among speakers, respecting diversity of opinions, and shared decision-making.

They increase their knowledge about collaborative professional inquiry and practice skills such as rigorous questioning and discussions about relevant topics such as student work, classroom observations, instructional practice, and patterns in student data. They increase their capacity to engage in and learn from conflict and are intentional about when and how they seek consensus or compromise to determine next actions.

Collaboration varies by educator role. For instance, classroom educators might participate in school-based collaborative inquiry teams to implement, support, and assess evidence-based and inclusive instructional strategies to achieve the goal of academic success for each student. School or district leaders might collaborate in a network to collaboratively analyze which of their collective efforts have an impact and should be continued.

At every level, educators use established frameworks and protocols to ensure that collaboration is directly relevant to their day-to-day work and focused on instruction that improves outcomes for all students.

Educators ensure their collaboration is purposeful, informed by student needs, and tightly focused through frequent team meetings, either in person or virtual, and adherence to shared norms that support the learning cycle, such as time for reflection and being transparent about goals and data.

Educators align their learning goals across teams as well as to school, district, and system priorities to ensure that collaborative learning is directly tied to improving student outcomes. Educators use protocols, templates, and tools to support the development and use of shared language, engagement of stakeholders and policymakers, and common methods for collecting and analyzing data and evidence.

Educators recognize the importance of establishing trusting relationships to build a culture of collaborative inquiry. They study what contributes to trust and why trust is important among educators as well as with families and caregivers, students, and community members. They recognize that establishing trust among peers is different from establishing trust among educators with different levels of authority or for those in supervisory positions.

Educators share responsibility for improving learning for all students.

Educators hold themselves and their colleagues responsible for making progress toward the goals they have established, rather than placing responsibility on the students or external actors. Individual educator learning is valuable in improving each teacher's agency and self-efficacy.

That learning is even more valuable when it adds to the knowledge and understanding of a team of colleagues and is leveraged for improvement and collective efficacy — the belief that they as educators are having a positive impact on student outcomes. Educators invest in others' professional growth because it builds trust over time as engagement deepens and improves and ultimately leads to better and more equitable student learning.

Educators assume responsibility for each and every student and are accountable to each other for progress toward shared goals for students. Educators hold themselves accountable through the analysis of data throughout the learning process to ensure each student's access to and opportunity for challenging learning and to identify students who need additional support.

Mutual accountability includes looking closely at whether colleagues provide opportunities to learn for every student and developing strategies to address any inequities. To inform this shared effort, educators observe and are observed by peers and identify opportunities to learn from each other's professional experience and research. These feedback-rich relationships extend across grade levels, teams, and content areas.

Educators commit to engaging in a formative assessment process of their own learning as well as to shared reflection. They also commit to being reliable, constructive colleagues who focus on how their individual and collaborative contributions improve instruction for all students. They reflect on evidence of their shared impact as a way to build collective efficacy and celebrate their positive influence on student outcomes.

Honoring this shared commitment, educators try to view questions and even conflict as productive, leading to a better shared understanding of how they work cooperatively to improve teaching and learning. Educators value the ways in which shared responsibility and mutual respect for expertise creates opportunities for meaningful educator agency and for both formal and informal leadership.

Selected research

Campbell, C., Osmond-Johnson, P., Faubert, B., Zeichner, K., & Hobbs-Johnson, A. (with Brown, S., DaCosta, P., Hales, A., Kuehn, L., Sohn, J., & Steffensen, K.). (2017). *The state of educators' professional learning in Canada: Final research report.* Learning Forward.

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Links to other standards

Educators use the Standards for Professional Learning together to inspire and drive improvement. Each of the 11 standards connects to the other standards to support a high-functioning learning system. **Here are some of the ways the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard connects to other standards:**

The **Professional Expertise** standard establishes content and skills essential to particular roles and functions that complement collaborative inquiry knowledge and practices.

The **Evidence** standard addresses the importance of using research and evidence in selecting intervention and setting goals.

The **Equity Foundations** standard highlights the role of professional learning in setting expectations, creating structures, and sustaining a productive culture.