Learning Designs

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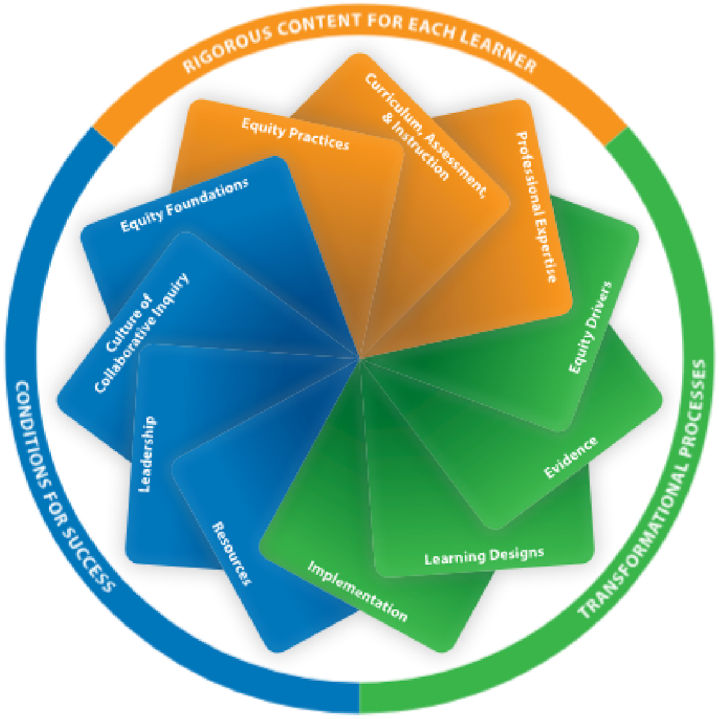
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

Standards for Professional Learning



LEARNING FORWARD

Learning Designs

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators set relevant and contextualized learning goals, ground their work in research and theories about learning, and implement evidence-based learning designs.

Educators design professional learning that achieves improved leader, teacher, and student outcomes by understanding and articulating how the learning will lead to the intended changes. Educators design learning that will achieve specific goals that are established based on an analysis of student and educator data, alignment with school and system goals, and an understanding of how people learn and change.

Educators design learning that considers multiple factors, including scope, time, duration, and structures as well as the learners' existing knowledge, levels of experience, capacity for change, and expectations for collaboration. Learning designs support learners' growth and transformation by meeting their needs while building their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices.

Educators in all roles contribute to the selection of learning designs when they provide information about their own learning needs, goals, and progress as well as when they share student data and information. Educators who lead professional learning analyze educator and student inputs and select the evidence-based strategies that will best facilitate and support sustained and effective learning and are aligned with school and system goals. Here are the main constructs of the Learning Designs standard.

Educators set relevant and contextualized learning goals.

Educators designing professional learning begin by defining the learning challenges to address and articulating the expected pathway to achieve desired outcomes and goals. They set professional learning goals based on student data and the associated knowledge and skills educators need to support students. They also seek alignment with school and system goals.

Educators set ambitious yet achievable goals, with the full engagement and participation of colleagues and stakeholders in multiple roles. Goals are specific and time-bound, and educators revisit goals when there is new data or evidence that might compel their adjustment. Educators build their capacity to break long-term goals into smaller milestones to recognize progress along the way.

Educators develop a theory of action for how any expected changes will happen, taking into account the degree of change required, the knowledge, skills, or practices to be strengthened, the calendar, and the goals and capacity of the stakeholders involved.

While theories of action range in type from formal logic models to flow charts, educators maintain a focus on a clear plan for how the professional learning will strengthen educator practice and, in turn, improve student learning. Educators balance tight adherence to the collaboratively developed plan with a willingness to adapt if data or conditions indicate a need for flexibility.

Educators identify the type of change they seek when they set learning goals. Learning, in addition to building knowledge, addresses educators' attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors. Learning to shift educators' leadership practices or behaviors, for example, is different than learning to build an educator's knowledge base about a content area.

Educators also design professional learning to address role-specific needs. The learning design to achieve a system-level goal of introducing a new math curriculum to teachers across a district, for instance, will be different than the learning design to achieve the goal of identifying instructional shifts that support implementation of the new curriculum in one school's math department.

Clarity and specificity in setting goals are important for both academic and nonacademic outcomes. Educators articulate a systemwide plan to diversify collaborative leadership teams or improve students' social and emotional skills with the same rigor as they do a curriculum implementation strategy. Educators adjust the ambitiousness and scale of their goal setting based on how experienced or familiar educators are with the content at hand, their comfort levels with new material, and expectations for engagement and collaboration.

Educators ground their work in research and theories about learning.

Educators use knowledge from cognitive science research about how people learn to help identify and select the learning design that will best impact the knowledge, beliefs, or practices to be changed, as articulated in their theory of action.

The science of learning — including how students and adults learn, what that means for educator practice, and what that means for professional learning — provides critical guidance for designing learning. Educators recognize that evidence-based design elements include active engagement, collaboration, meaning-making, inquiry, and reflection. Professional learning builds educators' capacity to select and apply the most useful aspects of learning theories.

Educators match learning goals to the design of learning. For instance, while an independent book study is appropriate for building knowledge or introducing new content, a collaborative inquiry cycle is more effective in the sustained implementation phase of an initiative.

Educators balance rigorous content with active engagement as they scaffold learning to support the goal of moving from learning to understanding to application, building competency and expertise over time. They understand that change takes time and persistence and reflect that understanding in the selection and sequencing of the learning designs.

They draw on the evidence that making new learning challenging yet attainable, engaging, self-directed, and rewarding improves educators' feelings of self-efficacy. Recognizing and celebrating the acquisition of skills and competencies along the way to a larger learning goal can be energizing and motivating for some educators.

Learning designers understand how beliefs, mindsets, and practices change, as well as what educator practices are likely to be influenced by professional learning. Co-creation of learning with peers or structured, systemic reflection, for example, support changes in mindsets and the development of new habits as educators experience the application of new knowledge.

Leaders and facilitators of professional learning also call on their professional experience and judgment to design learning that builds on learners' prior knowledge and provide opportunities to engage with the content and learn collaboratively with colleagues. They provide support that allows educators to be open about their own practice and potential areas of weakness and encourage them to try something new.

Learning designers balance educators' capacity to take on a student's or a colleague's perspective, how tightly they adhere to their current beliefs (consciously or unconsciously), and how willing they are to engage in vulnerable dialogue. Learning designs that are sequential and build toward achieving longer-term goals allow for midcourse adjustments and opportunities for incorporating student input and educator voice.

Educators design learning in alignment with the cadence of the academic year, taking into account the flow and arc of instruction and assessment as well as the cadence of the relevant curricula and instructional materials. They match learning opportunities to multiple points in the school year and provide sustained and aligned ways to practice new learning, skills, and strategies with ongoing feedback, support, and coaching.

Educators implement evidence-based learning designs.

Learning facilitators select designs that have an evidence base about their effectiveness and stay abreast of current research about innovations to continue to adapt as learners' contexts or needs evolve.

Educators identify and select learning designs that align with their theory of action and will meet the goals they have articulated. Here are examples of how evidence-based learning designs guide educator learning.

Immersive learning experiences in which educators experience the content, materials, and learning in a way that mirrors the student experience help educators understand the rigor and requirements of the curriculum.

Book studies introduce new knowledge that learners can access at their own pace and then deepen their understanding via discussion with colleagues.

Co-teaching provides opportunities to practice new learning and then to reflect, assess, and refine for continuous improvement of classroom instruction.

Expert coaching and mentoring support deeper understanding and transfer of the learning to practice over time.

Nonevaluative peer and content expert observation and feedback discussions provide opportunities to apply new learning and practice new techniques, skills, and strategies.

Collaborative study of curriculum and standards at all levels of the system builds a shared understanding of common goals as well as the development of a collaborative culture.

Professional learning communities focused on curriculum implementation provide consistent opportunities for teachers to examine student artifacts, exit tickets, and formative or summative assessments against the curriculum's expectations for grade-level work.

Jigsaw discussions focused on curricular alignment can reveal gaps in instruction across a content team, school, or system.

Collaborative examination of student data provides opportunities for educators to identify common gaps in student knowledge and reflect on what that means for changes needed in instruction at the classroom level and resources at the system level.

Communities of practice extend opportunities for structured collaboration across [private and public sectors] and provide job-embedded professional learning that improves coherence in leading and teaching across [common and contrasting types of schooling].

Structured reflection with tested protocols and clear norms for constructive and respectful dialogue builds trust among colleagues and across [private and public sectors].

Educators consider when learning designs could benefit from leveraging technology to increase flexibility and personalization for teachers, school leaders, and other roles across a system. Synchronous learning brings educators together across regions and geography, while asynchronous learning extends the learning experience and can address individuals' needs related to content or job-related knowledge, new curriculum and materials, or changes in policy.

Educators learn how to leverage technology in ways that strengthen their instruction and allow them to engage and support a variety of learners, such as eliciting comments via online whiteboards or annotating and reflecting on videos of instructional practices.

Educators learn new content or study research on their own or participate in online communities that provide access to resources as well as fellow learners. For the purposes of building community or trust, virtual meetings can augment in-person convenings and eliminate the traditional challenges of travel or spaces. Technologies such as virtual coaching and video analysis hold promise for an expanded role for technology in addressing goals related to strengthening classroom instruction.

Selected research

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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 Learning Designs standard connects to other standards:**

The **Equity Practices** standard discusses types of instruction and engagement that particular learning designs can foster and support to achieve better outcomes for all students.

The **Evidence** standard highlights the importance of using data and knowledge to inform relevant and appropriate learning design selections.

The **Implementation** standard provides information about how an understanding of change management and feedback processes supports and sustains effective learning designs.