

Building resilient systems of professional development

A D2L Discussion Paper



Supporting educators through innovative professional development during COVID-19 and beyond

In this new educational world, the goal is to create resilient and adaptive systems of learning, where even as needs change, so too does our ability to meet them. One aspect in ensuring this resiliency is creating professional development systems that quickly and holistically address educator needs.

We have demanded a lot from educators throughout the chaos of COVID-19. As soon as stay-at-home orders were announced, millions of teachers across the country were asked to shift how they educated children, all while living in isolation. Many teachers who had no experience with virtual learning were suddenly learning how to navigate online classrooms and to work differently. Some more technology-experienced educators sought to be more innovative and creative beyond basic delivery. Of course, all educators worked to be effective in addressing content and the individual needs of students living through times of immense uncertainty.

Half a year later, we are at a new crossroads. The dramatic, rapid changes forced upon educational systems because of the pandemic created novel needs for both students and educators. We have learned important lessons about the need to rapidly upskill teachers, implement remote learning, and meet the holistic needs of students when physical access to the school building is not an option. As a new school year begins, it is important that we learn from this experience and examine not only how we can best support students, but also how we can best support educator needs in an ongoing manner.

Professional development and the resilient learning systems of the future

Professional development is foundational to educational systems' support of educator growth, confidence, adaptability, and resiliency. At its best, professional development offers continuous opportunities for educators and administrators to increase their knowledge and skills, thereby improving the educational experience of students and educators alike.

Traditionally, professional development has served many purposes, including skills training, content knowledge, community building, leadership development, coaching, and mentoring. As importantly, professional development can help instill confidence in educators to address whatever challenges they may come across and support their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. In a challenging year, professional development must remain a priority offering to all educators, as a touchstone of continuous learning, even in times of crisis.

The vision

There is an opportunity to create innovative professional development systems that have the capacity to better support educators throughout this pandemic and beyond. These systems, at their core, are designed to be **resilient**; provide **equitable access** statewide; **support rapid deployment** of content when necessary; enable professional **community**; and have **content that speaks directly to the contemporary and long-term needs** of teachers and students.

Recommendations

To help build the resilient professional learning systems of the future, today we must address the unique needs presented by COVID-19, all while taking steps that will strengthen and innovate professional development broadly and durably. The recommendations below are critical actions that administrators can take in pursuit of these dual goals.

Develop content in collaboration with educators—No one has more insight into the needs of educators than educators themselves. Professional development programming should be created in consultation with educators and educator associations, with the goal of affirmatively addressing educator needs. Professional development programming should be developed in tandem with teacher-led professional learning programs, where content is developed for and by educators.

Further, educators should be afforded the opportunity for continuous feedback on content and programming, and offered personalized learning pathways based on teacher-stated and data-informed needs. Educators each have their own approaches to teaching, and they must be armed with the tools and tactics to export those unique approaches, everywhere from the classroom to the online learning environment. Content and pedagogy go hand in hand, and educators need to know how to reflect their own approach to the latter online.

Prioritize training that focuses on community building and wellness—Just as we look to provide a holistic array of services and supports to students, we must also support the socio-emotional wellness of our educators. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have reported feeling lost, lonely, depressed, and overwhelmed.¹ Professional development programming should address these challenges head on, centering community building amongst educators and administrators—even when audiences are not able to physically meet. Coaching, mentorship, and community forums are necessary to ensure the growth, resilience, and retention of educators. Further, programming should include wellness activities and content that centers educators' mental, physical, and emotional health.

Prioritize content that centers on COVID-19-specific issues—The world of education has changed—and the needs of teachers and students have changed with it. Professional development must address the specific challenges of the day, such as identifying skills gaps, remediating learning for students who experienced gaps in their learning experiences, and for teaching in a remote learning environment. Professional development should equip teachers for providing high-quality learning in a remote learning environment and include technological and pedagogical content focused on best practices for remote learning.

¹ <https://thejournal.com/articles/2020/06/02/survey-teachers-feeling-stressed-anxious-overwhelmed-and-capable.aspx>

Invest in a statewide professional development system—A state-level professional learning system will enable professional development programming at scale, allowing for shared content, community building, and rapid upskilling of educators and administrators. A state-level platform will enable equitable remote access to learning opportunities for educators across the state and support rapid deployment of professional development programming.

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