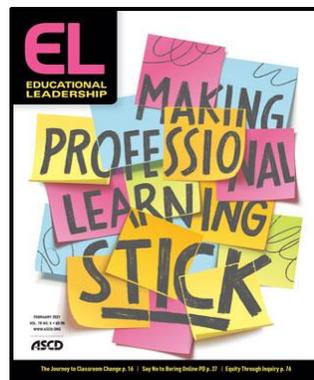


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# Professional Learning with Staying Power

**Thomas R. Guskey**

*Six steps to evidence-based professional learning that makes a difference.*

Educators today are bombarded with professional learning opportunities. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the cancellation of nearly all education conferences and large group professional gatherings, it has spurred the development of hundreds of online learning programs, video conferences, Zoom sessions, and podcasts. Teachers and school leaders have seemingly unlimited opportunities to improve their practice through district programs, PLCs, and individually selected experiences.

Among this myriad of options, how do we know what's worthwhile, makes a difference, and truly works? How can we guarantee the time and effort we invest in professional learning will lead to meaningful and enduring improvements? In other words, what is effective professional learning and what makes it stick?

Although researchers don't always agree on the specific elements of effective professional learning, they generally do agree on how *effectiveness* should be defined. Most concur that professional learning is effective when it has a positive and enduring impact on school leadership, classroom practice, and student learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). They consider student learning to include not only academic achievement, but also behavioral outcomes such as attendance, engagement, and dropout rates, as well as affective goals related to social-emotional learning, growth mindset, habits of mind, and the like. Some researchers contend that in most instances, this definition can be simplified to include *only* improvements in student learning. They argue that professional learning experiences that result in enhanced leadership and changed practice but fail to yield any discernable improvements in student learning should hardly be considered "effective" (Guskey, 2002).

When it comes to identifying professional learning experiences that *have* proven effective, however, the evidence is scant. Sure, we have occasional success stories based on anecdotal evidence. Case studies here and there depict experiences that participants considered "effective"

because these events offered useful ideas or were relevant to their on-the-job responsibilities (Guskey, 2014). What we lack is strong and valid evidence from activities and programs implemented in diverse contexts showing clear improvements in student learning outcomes (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013; Yoon et al., 2007).

## **When Professional Learning Doesn't Work**

At the same time, evidence on the ineffectiveness of most professional learning experiences for educators abounds. In a 2013 synthesis of research on professional learning, Allison Gulamhussein concluded, "Most professional development today neither changes teacher practice nor improves student learning" (p. 3). A summary of more than 900 research studies on the effectiveness of math-related professional development approaches similarly found "very limited causal evidence to guide districts and schools in selecting [an] approach or to support developers' claims about their approaches" (Gersten et al., 2014, p. 1). A report from the teacher-recruitment group TNTP offered one of the most damning indictments, concluding, "In short, we bombard teachers with help, but most of it is not helpful—to teachers as professionals or to schools seeking better instruction" (Jacob & McGovern, 2015, p. 2).

Hence, despite the recognized importance of professional learning in education improvement efforts (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010), the disappointing consensus from these summaries is that most professional learning is not effective and *does not stick*. That being the case, where do we go from here? What steps can we take to make sure educators' professional learning experiences provide them with the means to improve student learning outcomes?

## **Making Things Better**

Described below are six specific steps we can take to make professional learning initiatives more effective and truly sticky. These steps are derived from comparative analyses of efforts that resulted in demonstrable improvements in student learning versus those that did not. Although strong evidence supports each step, the effects of this combination of steps has yet to be fully tested. Still, given the dismal history of past efforts, the outlook for improvement appears exceptionally promising.

### **1. Focus on evidence-based practices.**

Too often we plan professional learning experiences for processes, not for results. We focus on the means rather than the ends. We engage participants in activities that are collaborative, job-embedded, contextually relevant, and derived from results of the most recent teacher-needs survey. What's lacking in this approach is a clear understanding of the purpose of those activities and what they are intended to accomplish. It's much like choosing the route for a journey before deciding on the destination.

Education conferences sometimes contribute to this distraction. School leaders don't always go to conferences to find solutions to specific instructional problems or student learning difficulties. Rather, they attend to identify presenters who will be well-received by teachers and staff members at upcoming professional learning events. They are "trolling for talent," trying to find

reasonably priced speakers who will entertain and motivate. Style takes precedence over substance. We seldom consider whether the ideas offered by those presenters have been thoroughly tested and can be backed by solid research showing the impact on student learning.

Instead of focusing on processes, we need to plan professional learning experiences with the end in mind—and that end should be improvements in specific student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2014). We should be asking questions such as: What do we want our students to accomplish? How will this help us do that? What evidence supports the effectiveness of this innovation? and How good is that evidence? This requires school leaders to do their homework. It also means challenging presenters who make the claim "research says ..." but then fail to offer specific citations that can be read and evaluated for their quality.

Both the processes and content of professional learning activities are vitally important and must be thoughtfully addressed. Of course, educators can be engaged in critically important ideas and subject matter in ineffective ways. But just as we must decide our journey's destination before we can determine the best route, we also must clarify the goals we want to achieve in terms of better practice and improved student learning before we can judge the value, worth, and appropriateness of any professional learning endeavor. When we begin by identifying the student learning outcomes we want to improve, the criteria for judging effectiveness become apparent.

## **2. Provide guidance in balancing adaptations.**

Successful innovations are never implemented identically in every school or classroom. Instead, new policies and practices must be adapted to a multitude of situational and contextual differences among schools (Elmore, 1997). An appropriate balance must be struck, therefore, between program fidelity and contextual conditions. Researchers refer to this as "mutual adaptation" (McLaughlin, 1976; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). It means that when innovations are implemented, change takes place in two directions. Individuals must adapt in order to implement the new policies and practices. But the innovation also must be adapted to fit the unique characteristics of the context.

Too much change in either direction can mean disaster. If the innovation requires too much adaptation from individuals and departs significantly from their current practice, implementation is likely to be mechanical and ineffective. But too much adaptation of the innovation may result in the loss of elements essential to program impact. Professional learning experiences must be planned that assist teachers in adapting innovations to the unique characteristics of their students, classrooms, schools, and communities while maintaining the elements of the innovation most vital to success.

## **3. Offer feedback to confirm the change makes a difference for students.**

For new practices to be sustained and changes to endure, teachers need regular feedback about the effects of their efforts on students. Success is reinforcing. People tend to repeat actions that bring success and decrease or halt actions that don't. This is especially true of teachers, whose primary psychological rewards come from feeling certain about their capacity to affect student growth and development (Huberman, 1992).

Successful professional learning initiatives include procedures for teachers to receive frequent and specific feedback on results. In other words, teachers must see explicit evidence from *their* students in *their* classrooms that the changes make a difference. With instructional reforms, for example, seeing improvements in daily work or improved results on regular classroom assessments greatly helps. So, too, would evidence of students being more engaged in class activities, more willing to participate, or developing greater confidence in themselves as learners.

Nearly all teachers have had the experience of working hard to implement programs that promised far more than they delivered. As a result, they are understandably hesitant to take on new, untested practices. But when their implementation efforts yield demonstrable improvements in their students' learning, not only do the new practices gain credibility, but teachers incorporate them as part of their instructional routine.

#### **4. Ensure the feedback is based on evidence teachers trust.**

School leaders and teachers don't always trust the same evidence when it comes to determining how well students are learning. School leaders generally perceive the results from nationally normed standardized assessments, state assessments, and district assessments to be more valid indicators of student achievement than do teachers. In contrast, teachers grant more validity to classroom observations, classroom assessments, and homework completion (Guskey, 2007). In other words, teachers trust their own evidence gathered regularly from their students in their classrooms.

To ensure a focus on trustworthy evidence, conversations about determining effectiveness need to take place *before* implementation begins. Prior to any change in policies or practices, teachers need time to address questions such as: How will we know if this works? What changes in students would we expect to see? and What evidence do we trust to show that this innovation makes a positive difference (Guskey, 2014)?

Change can feel threatening and usually brings about a certain amount of anxiety. It's especially threatening if those responsible for implementation don't know what they are trying to achieve or what evidence to look for in results. When teachers decide the evidence and plan how it's going to be gathered, not only are they more likely to find it, but it also will be more meaningful when they do.

#### **5. Plan to gather evidence on effects quickly.**

Any change that holds great promise for increasing teachers' effectiveness and enhancing student learning will likely require extra work, especially in the beginning. This can significantly add to teachers' workloads. Without gaining evidence quickly that the extra work is worthwhile, most teachers will abandon the change and revert back to the practices they have already developed and refined in their classrooms (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006).

This reluctance to persist isn't due to a fear of change or lack of confidence on the part of teachers. Rather it stems from teachers' pervasive commitment to the learning and well-being of their students. Trying something new means risking failure, which runs counter to most teachers'

strong commitment to ensuring every student learns. To continue using new practices without evidence of positive effects means risking that students might not learn as well. And teachers won't sacrifice their students for the sake of innovation (Guskey, 2020).

This means that leaders can't wait for results from large-scale accountability assessments administered at the end of the school year to verify the effects of the new practices. Instead, leaders must find ways to check on success *within the first few weeks*. They need to bring teachers together after trying out the new practices to share impressions, compare results, and discuss next steps. Positive results provide the encouragement teachers need to persist in their efforts. Evidence that shows no improvement can be used to pinpoint problems or difficulties where adaptations in implementation strategies may be required.

## **6. Provide ongoing support ... with pressure.**

Improvement is never smooth and linear. It's a jagged process of ups and downs, with good days and occasional bad days (Fullan, 2004). This is especially true in teaching, where day-to-day variation in students' moods and dispositions confound teachers' best efforts to ensure a consistently positive learning environment.

Ongoing support coupled with pressure is essential for continued and sustained implementation during these uneven times. Support allows those engaged in improvement efforts to tolerate the anxiety of occasional setbacks. Pressure is sometimes necessary to initiate change among those whose lack the self-impetus to get involved (Corcoran, Fuhman, & Belcher, 2001; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010). It also provides the encouragement, motivation, and occasional nudging that some practitioners need to persist in the challenging tasks that are inherent in all improvement efforts. Pressure can take the form of a leader's public advocacy of the change and of their clear appreciation for those involved.

However, such support and pressure must be accompanied by strong evidence validating the practices being implemented. As described in point #1, leaders must have confidence in the effectiveness of these changes based on valid research evidence. The time and energy teachers invest is too valuable to waste on efforts supported only by blogs, Twitter chats, or the opinions of charismatic consultants.

For new instructional practices to be implemented well and continue, they must become a natural part of teachers' repertoire of classroom procedures. Teachers must come to use the new practices almost out of habit. For this to occur, continued follow-up and support based on concrete evidence of effects are essential.

Of all aspects of professional learning experiences, follow-up is perhaps the most neglected. To be effective and sticky, professional learning must be seen as a *process*, not an event (Learning Forward, 2011). Learning to be proficient at something new or finding meaning in a new way of doing things is difficult and sometimes painful. Furthermore, any change that holds great promise for increasing individuals' competence is likely to require extra work. It is imperative, therefore, that improvement be seen as a continuous and ongoing endeavor (Guskey, 2020).

## When Professional Learning *Does* Work

Making professional learning stick shouldn't be a bewildering process, especially when we agree on what it means to stick. If we begin with clear ideas about the student learning outcomes we want to improve, identify the evidence we trust to verify those improvements, focus on innovations with strong supporting data, offer teachers firsthand confirmation that their actions make a difference, and take the steps necessary to support and sustain implementation, we can virtually guarantee that professional learning will achieve the important goals for which it's intended.

The ineffectiveness of so many current professional learning experiences stems from the lack of clarity about the desired outcomes and the tendency of leaders to gravitate more toward what's popular than what trustworthy evidence supports. However, those who maintain a laser-like focus on the broad range of student learning outcomes, help teachers adapt evidence-based strategies and practices to their unique context, and find ways for teachers to see tangible results from their efforts, will undoubtedly improve the effectiveness of all professional learning experiences and increase enthusiasm for these opportunities in the future.

### Reflect & Discuss

- How can your team plan professional learning with the end—specific student learning outcomes—in mind?
- What can you do to ensure teachers get the opportunity to "see explicit evidence from *their* students in *their* classrooms that the changes make a difference"?
- Has follow-up been an area of strength or weakness in your school? Plot ways to better examine and utilize evidence of impact in the near and long term.

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