



Washington State Association for Supervision
and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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How Does Your ‘Garden’ of Professional Learning Grow? The ‘What’ and ‘How’ of Successful Standards Implementation

“The most powerful strategy school systems have at their disposal to improve teacher effectiveness is professional development. It is available to almost every educator, and—when planned and implemented correctly—it ensures that educators acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to help more students meet standards.”
(Hirsch, S., 2011)

As summer blooms in the Pacific Northwest, a garden analogy has resonance for me as I think about the professional learning systems necessary to support educators to implement and bring to life state learning standards in classrooms throughout the year. Observing gardens in my neighborhood reminds me of the intention (or lack thereof) that my neighbors and I put into the planting of bulbs, sowing of seeds, and trimming of trees and shrubs during the fall and winter months. What was the vision? What did we do since planting to cultivate the soil and plants for a productive spring? What did we invest (time, money, resources) and when? Did we have dedicated time for cultivating the garden? Who needed to be involved but wasn’t? What is our commitment to maintaining the garden now that it is flourishing and then in getting it ready for winter? Have we articulated a cycle of support that is sustainable and maintainable?

Similar questions are at the heart of the professional learning that is necessary for educators and students as we transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

Washington’s four State Learning Goals articulated in the [1993 Basic Education Act](#) present a vision of student learning in public education that acknowledges the importance of schools in supporting the whole child. This vision and goals, together with specifically articulated [state learning standards](#), represent the “WHAT”, or the seeds that must be planted from the start of each student’s K-12 educational experience as to what all students should know and be able to do. Without ongoing intention and attention to educators’ professional learning needs from the start and throughout the year, the vision of every student graduating high school ready and prepared for their next steps whether they plan to enter the workforce or go to college, is not achievable. “Standards by themselves cannot raise achievement. Standards don’t stay up late at night working on lesson plans, or stay after school making sure every student learns – it’s teachers who do that. Standards don’t implement themselves. Education leaders from the state board to the building principal must make the Standards a reality in schools.” (CCSS Mathematics Publisher’s Criteria, p.1)

The “HOW” is essential. It is where the rubber meets the road in districts, buildings, and ultimately classrooms.

“The dramatic shift in teaching prompted by the common core will require **practical, intensive, and ongoing** professional learning – not one-off “spray and pray” training that exposes everyone to the same material and hope it sticks.” (Hirsh, S. 2011)

Over the past 18 months, our state has had the privilege of working with and learning from the national Learning Forward organization (formerly the National Staff Development Council) and the state of Kentucky as part of the national [“Transforming Professional Learning \(TPL\) Initiative”](#). During the first year, Kentucky, as the first state to adopt and assess the CCSS, embarked on an overhaul of their state and local professional learning systems in support of the new standards in conjunction with a new educator evaluation system. States across the nation, including ours are also on a similar journey to navigate and integrate the interconnected efforts within implementing the new CCSS and transitioning to a new educator growth and development systems (in Washington this is the Teacher and Principal Evaluation Project). For the second phase of the project (this spring and next year), OSPI is partnering with [Washington’s Learning Forward Affiliate](#), and [Federal Way Public School’s Teaching for Learning team](#) to define, refine, and put into practice foundational elements necessary to create and sustain strong professional learning systems at each of our levels that will sustain beyond changing standards. All three partners are deeply considering their roles for supporting high quality professional learning across the state.

Several excerpts from a recent Learning Forward action brief, [Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Professional Learning Required](#) (2011) capture the foundational underpinnings and core principles necessary for each of us in our difference roles to consider and act upon carefully. First, several core principles must be acknowledged in the shift of in relation to *how* the state, districts, and schools think about and support students and educators in these transitions (pp. 10-16):

- Change requires learning;
- Standards drive effective professional learning;
- Professional learning addresses multiple purposes;
- Commitment to equity ensures success for all students; and
- Effective professional learning is a shared responsibility.

In the action brief, Joellen Killion (2011) also provides recommendations of specific actions that districts, schools, and individual educators can take as they consider the “how” in building comprehensive and sustainable professional learning systems (pp. 29-31) aligned with the core principles above and that echo throughout our work with Kentucky and within our state with Federal Way Public Schools.

I’d like to close with several questions that I will be using with my content team at OSPI and that I’d like to invite you to join us in considering as we reframe the “how” at each of our levels in our educational system:

- What are the vision, mission, and beliefs for professional learning in your district or building?
- How do you define professional learning?
- What types of professional learning do educators experience and who participates?
- What ensures that professional learning meets standards for high quality?

- How is time allocated and who determines when it occurs and how it is used? When does it occur?
- Who determines what types and how much funding are used to support professional learning for all teachers?
- What other resources (staff, technology, materials) support professional learning? How are they acquired, allocated, and integrated?
- How is professional learning evaluated? By whom? How often? Who uses the results? How?

As you engage in this dialogue personally and with your teams, there are many resources and districts out there to support you and serve as thought partners. In addition to the hyperlinks throughout this article, additional resources include:

- Washington State's [CCSS District Implementation Readiness Assessment](#)
- Learning Forward's publications: [Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Professional Learning Required](#) (2011) and [Establishing Time for Professional Learning](#) (2013)

References:

Killion, J. (2011) *Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Professional Learning Required*. Learning Forward. <http://www.learningforward.org/docs/pdf/read-the-brief-%28pdf%29.pdf>

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