



Advancing Instruction and Leadership in the Nation's Great City Schools

A Framework for Developing, Implementing, and Sustaining High-Quality Professional Development



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FIRST EDITION

ABOUT THE COUNCIL

The Council of the Great City Schools is the only national organization exclusively representing the needs of urban public schools. Composed of 77 large-city school districts, its mission is to promote the cause of urban education and to advocate for inner-city students through legislation, research, and media relations. The organization also provides a network for school districts sharing common problems to exchange information and to collectively address new challenges as they emerge in order to deliver the best possible education for urban youth.

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Thank you.

The Council of the Great City Schools, March 2021

PART I: OVERVIEW

Purpose

This guide aims to present district instructional leaders and staff with a core set of criteria for what high-quality professional development entails. What makes this particular document different and useful is the focus on practical issues of district-level implementation in multiple teaching and learning environments. This is a guide designed by practitioners for practitioners, and it was important to the advisory committee and project team to develop a resource that provides clear, concrete guidance for district leaders based on our collective experience with best practices—and common pitfalls—in selecting, designing, implementing, and sustaining high quality professional development that not only represents what has traditionally worked in the past, but is nimble enough to meet the demands of the present.

Of course, the landscape of public education has changed drastically since work on this document began. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide school closures, school districts have had to quickly adjust the way they support and equip teachers and staff to meet the needs of students in a virtual environment. The challenge in supporting and advancing this work, then, is to highlight both the enduring design features of effective professional development, while documenting and sharing the innovative and promising work being done across districts to support teaching and learning amidst rolling school closures and a stubbornly persistent worldwide pandemic.

To this end, the guide includes not only a discussion of the research, preconditions, and design principles for effective professional development programming, but annotated exemplars from districts around the country to ensure that a district's professional development programming meets the new and changing needs of teachers and maintains common, high expectations for all students. At the same time, we have endeavored to create a forward-looking, values-driven blueprint for the kind of professional learning opportunities that we feel would propel instructional excellence and equity in our nation's urban public schools.

For the purposes of this framework, we will be addressing professional development for teachers, principals, and other school-based and central office instructional staff that is either designed, developed, provided, overseen, or supported by the district. Of course, the reality of extended virtual learning over the past year has meant that parents and other caregivers are supporting student learning in more hands-on and personal ways than ever before, and this presents districts with a whole host of questions pertaining to the resources and outreach that might be necessary and appropriate to integrate them more intentionally into the instructional process. These questions are important and will clearly have an impact on the reach and efficacy of instruction for the foreseeable future. But for now, we want to take the opportunity to define professional development for district staff and leaders, to identify the preconditions that should exist to ensure the effective implementation of professional development, and to share what urban districts across the country are doing, what they can do, to provide the kinds of preparation that teachers and other instructional staff and leaders will need to support students and advance learning in the coming school year and beyond.

Defining Professional Learning and Development

Creating an organizational culture of high standards, inclusivity, and respect and advocacy for diversity requires a workforce that shares not only common instructional objectives and strategies, but a sense of urgency and ownership for the achievement and outcomes of all students. Professional development, therefore, is the mechanism by which a district signals its expectations and respect for educators, as well as its instructional vision and values. It is through the articulation of shared standards, assessment, professional development, and evaluation that a district creates an overarching “picture” of what educational excellence and equity should look like across the system, and how the diverse instructional needs and unfinished learning of students should be addressed in the context of grade-level content and rigor.

In this context, high-quality professional development for teachers of all students, as well as other school-based and central office instructional staff and leaders, comprises a coherent program of ongoing adult learning designed to improve and enrich the knowledge and skills of educators, and by extension the academic prospects of students. By “coherent,” we mean that professional development is thoughtfully and collaboratively planned; aligned to the district’s instructional standards and evaluation system; and consistent with the vision and beliefs a district holds—as well as the current understanding in the field—about what and how students should learn, what they are capable of achieving, and the role that teachers and leaders play in enabling all students to reach their potential in any learning environment.

These professional growth opportunities are purposefully selected and customized to the roles, responsibilities, and needs of the intended audience. They build educator capacity and agency by focusing on job-required competencies, content knowledge, mindsets, and behavior, while at the same time explicitly attending to how students learn, and the instructional, social, and emotional needs of a diverse student body.

High-quality professional development is not a one-time occurrence or event, but rather an essential component of a district’s long-term improvement process. As such, it should be designed as a continuous cycle of both structured and job-embedded learning through which educators have the opportunity to work together with their peers, to reflect on their practice, and to develop progressively more sophisticated understanding, knowledge, and skills. This learning, however, must be actionable and contextualized within the framework of daily classroom life—whether those classrooms are physical, virtual, or hybrid. The ultimate goal is not just to create more expert teachers, staff, and leaders, but to systematically change and improve the educational experiences and outcomes of students.

What the Research Says

The advisory committee spent a good deal of time investigating the research on professional development, looking for indications of what ultimately results in improvements in educator practice coupled with increases in student achievement. While this research base may be extensive, it is far from definitive when it comes to identifying any one program or approach that is guaranteed to work in all districts or contexts. Moreover, there is very little research that specifically addresses the kinds of professional learning K-12 teachers need—and the new modes of providing this learning—in a virtual or hybrid learning environment.

Nonetheless, we can look to the research to help us identify general features or characteristics that best support and advance the quality of instruction in service of student achievement—whether this instruction occurs in person, virtually, or in a hybrid learning environment. In one meta-analysis researchers identified 35 well-defined studies that reported a positive impact on teacher practice and student outcomes. The researchers then identified the prevalent features of the most effective professional development programs for teachers (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017).

Of these prevalent features, the advisory committee focused on four in particular: a focus on content, support for collaboration, provision of feedback and reflection, and personalized coaching and support. Again, these are features that make professional development effective regardless of whether we are preparing teachers for in-person, hybrid, or virtual instruction. Here is a closer look at these four features.

- **A focus on content.** In general, research suggests that the most effective professional development programs focused on how to teach specific content and how students learn that content, in conjunction with the materials that are being used in the classroom (Lynch, Hill, Gonzalez, & Pollard, 2019). This type of professional development provides teachers the opportunity to study their students' work, test out use of the curriculum materials with their students, and discuss the impact of a particular pedagogical approach on student learning in the content area. In this way, discipline-specific, content-focused professional development supports teaching and learning within the classroom context (whether physical or virtual), as opposed to generic professional development delivered externally or divorced from teachers' school or district contexts (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017).
- **Support for collaboration.** There is a positive association between teachers participating in professional development together with their co-workers—as well as teacher's participation during curriculum implementation meetings—and increased student achievement. These findings suggest the importance of teachers having opportunities to discuss instructional innovations with colleagues and address issues that arise when implementing new instructional approaches (Lynch, Hill, Gonzalez, & Pollard, 2019; Penuel, Sun, Frank, & Gallagher, 2012; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). This may be even more important in a virtual context, as even seasoned teachers are dealing with unprecedented instructional challenges. Moreover, this is consistent with the idea that formal or informal learning communities among teachers can act as powerful mechanisms for teacher growth and development (Desimone, 2009).
- **Feedback and reflection.** Professional development models associated with gains in student learning are intentional about building in time for reflection and feedback, ensuring that teachers can think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice. This often includes opportunities to share both positive and constructive reactions to lesson plans, demonstration lessons, or videos of instruction (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). While feedback and reflection are two distinct practices, they work together to help teachers become proficient with practices that they may have learned about or seen modeled during professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). Specifically, teachers self-reported that the most effective feedback provides a clear vision of success and an accurate assessment of their strengths and challenges in meeting these expectations (TNTP, 2015). In this way, job-embedded feedback and reflection are likely to improve the chances of success for instructional reforms, as instructional practices that are new and unfamiliar are more likely to be accepted and retained when they are perceived as increasing one's competence and effectiveness (Guskey, 2000).
- **Personalized coaching and support.** A recent meta-analysis of 44 studies of teacher coaching programs found that coaching had a larger effect size on instructional change than previously reported effect sizes measuring the differences between novice and experienced teachers—traditionally one of the largest factors determining teacher effectiveness. These authors characterized effective coaching as individualized (one-on-one), intensive (at least every couple of weeks), sustained (throughout a semester or year), and focused (deliberate practice on specific skills), with an observation and feedback cycle (Kraft, Blazer, & Hogan, 2017). Additionally, effective coaches were experts in their field who could model research-based practices in the classroom and could enhance teachers' knowledge and instructional skills through cycles of instructional planning, discussion, job-embedded reflection and

feedback, supporting teachers' efforts to incorporate these practices in their own classrooms. To this end, coaches need an understanding of adult learning theory, which differs from how children learn, as teachers wrestle with changes in practice. To effectively support classroom teachers, they must challenge teachers' assumptions and provide continuous support as teachers make connections between new learning, their existing knowledge, and previous experience (Merriam, 2008). It is therefore important that coaches respect teachers' existing knowledge and experience and provide meaningful feedback (Paige, 2002; Hurd, 2002; Creane, 2002, Griffiths, 2005).

It is also important to note that while coaching was found to have a significant positive impact, this impact was typically not evident after the first year of placement (Campbell & Malkus, 2011), underscoring the point that coaching should be designed and implemented as a long-term investment.

Additionally, the research found that the most effective professional development programming incorporates active learning (Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Loucks-Horsley et al., 1998), uses models of effective practice (Wilson, Rozelle, & Mikeska, 2011), and is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017; Desimone, 2009). Moreover, the research suggests that it is through the combined power of multiple features that professional development best achieves its goals of changing practice and improving instructional outcomes.

Lessons from the Field

A useful counterpoint to this discussion of the research is a brief review of the most common challenges faced by school districts in professional development programming. Over the course of technical assistance reviews of large urban school districts across the country, the Council often makes the same observations despite vast differences in district context, culture, and approach.

In particular, focus groups with teachers, principals, principal supervisors, and other instructional support staff such as coaches, paraprofessionals, and specialists consistently underscore the fact that the perceived limitations of professional development are driven by four main factors—

- **Lack of Differentiation in Professional Learning Opportunities.** School staff and leaders who are dismissive of their district's professional development most commonly report that these sessions or offerings are "one size fits all," and don't take into account the background experience, tenure, or needs of individual teachers, staff, and leaders. We often hear that professional development is too general or too basic to be useful, that it doesn't address the needs of veteran teachers, and that it doesn't change from year to year.

At the other end of the spectrum from veteran teachers, professional development for new teachers is another common challenge. Whether a teacher is new to the district, new to the grade or content, or new to the field, it is critical that they receive the support and resources necessary to support student learning from day one. Yet in focus groups with teachers across cities, we often hear that many teachers spend their first months or year lacking the district guidance and mentorship they need to successfully meet expectations. Moreover, if teachers miss a professional development opportunity, whether because it occurred early in the school year or in the initial phases of a districtwide initiative, there is often no way for them to revisit this training. This not only limits teachers' professional growth but undermines the district's aim of instilling instructional consistency and quality.

- **Lack of Content Focus.** Professional development in many districts is heavily focused on pedagogy or strategy. What is often missing is the deep content learning that teachers need to master and implement the instructional shifts and level of academic rigor called for by college- and career-readiness

standards, and the contextual awareness required to effectively deliver this academic content to students with multi-faceted needs.

- **Lack of Effective Coaching Support.** We also observe many shared challenges in how coaches—or instructional support staff that provide coaching—are selected, deployed, supported, and overseen across districts. There is a common lack of clarity or communication around the role that coaches are expected to play in schools, which leads to inconsistency in their work and situations where coaches are pulled from classrooms to perform non-coaching tasks such as paperwork for various projects, student supervision, or “other duties as assigned.” This lack of clarity is exacerbated in districts where several different departments may deploy coaches with inconsistent or overlapping objectives, or where external vendors provide coaches in support of specific programs or materials that may not be aligned to a district’s overall vision for instruction.

Another leading challenge involves the workload of coaches. Coaches often report being responsible for an excessive number of school sites, limiting their ability to provide and sustain hands-on, personalized support. We also commonly observe unevenness in the skill and expertise of coaches across a district—the result of a lack of rigor in the selection and hiring process and, ironically, a lack of in-service professional development for staff who are tasked with “leading the learning” among teachers and other school-based staff and leaders.

Additionally, districts often ignore the professional learning and support they could provide that would enable teachers to effectively support and mentor their peers in learning and implementing new technologies and skills.

- **Lack of Alignment.** Finally, we commonly observe that district professional development “programs” amount to a disconnected and arbitrary set of course offerings, which are unlikely to help build overall instructional capacity given their lack of coherence or alignment to the district’s instructional priorities or strategic plan. Specifically, districts often present professional learning as a menu of options for teachers or leaders, explaining that this system provides flexibility and choice. While this is a powerful idea in theory, in practice we often find that this menu-driven approach fails to enhance coherence or district capacity to make progress on its academic goals. While teachers may earn the course credits or “professional development units” they need for step increases, the district has missed its opportunity to instill the kinds of instructional practices and quality necessary to drive systemwide improvement and realize its larger instructional vision.

Another important dimension of alignment—or a lack of alignment—is the consistency of professional development and messaging provided to different audiences. For example, school leaders and administrators are not always well informed about the professional development provided to teachers in their building, so they are unprepared to reinforce the learning, provide feedback, and monitor the desired changes in practice.

This disconnect also extends to the professional development provided to different sets of teachers or instructional support staff. In particular, when we interview special education and ELL/ESOL teachers, they report that the professional development they receive is not only separate from the training that general education teachers receive, it also does not reflect the district core curriculum and grade-level standards. At the same time, general education teachers do not receive the professional development they need—including training on differentiated instruction and scaffolding—to effectively meet the specialized needs of the students that are in their classrooms without needlessly separating them out from classroom work or discussions, or watering down the pedagogy they employ for “those kids.”

This siloed approach to professional development is all too often a reflection of an overall lack of coordination between general education, special education, and English language learner units in the district office, and calls into question the ability of districts to effectively support their instructional vision. While district leaders often articulate a message of educational equity and shared accountability for all students, without the training, skills, and resources teachers need to address the needs of diverse learners this is not a realistic or well-supported vision. As in so many cases, professional development is the “how”—the strategy for turning vision into practice.

The COVID-19 crisis has only put a finer point on each of these enduring issues, in addition to introducing new challenges and considerations. Beginning in March of 2020, the Council established weekly open calls with instructional staff and leaders across member districts. These conversations have revealed a number of shared instructional hurdles in the pivot to virtual learning, as well as early lessons learned as districts have designed and deployed large scale professional development in real time to support synchronous and asynchronous instruction for students across the nation.

To begin with, districts have had to address a **lack of teacher facility with the technology and tools provided for online learning**. Most districts shared that they were “technology-rich,” with a wealth of digital resources that teachers could use for instruction, intervention, and advanced studies. However, as districts realized that they had to rely on all teachers using their digital platforms effectively in order to teach their content, it became increasingly evident that there was great variability among their teachers in not only understanding the basic applications of the digital resources (i.e., taking attendance, posting assignments, accessing learning management systems, etc.), but in using them effectively as the sole sources for planning and implementing quality lessons. Districts therefore had to design and provide additional professional development on how to use learning management systems, as well as all of the other digital products available from the district for instructional purposes and video conferencing. This has required a substantial amount of coordination across departments (i.e., general education, ELL, Special Education, Technology, etc.) to design and implement a viable and comprehensive instructional continuity plan.

Aside from these more technical issues of proficiency with tools and technology, districts have also had to address the necessary **shifts in pedagogy** that must take place to be effective in various instructional settings. While many districts explicitly describe the differences among face-to-face, hybrid, and remote learning, there is very little guidance provided that illustrates the differences in instructional strategies, planning, pedagogy, and assessment that are most effective for these distinctive learning environments to promote sustained and authentic student engagement.

Unfinished learning is another issue that has dominated many of the conversations with district instructional staff over the past year. However, while the scale of the challenge (owing to the shared nature of the educational disruption) may be novel, unfinished learning is nothing new. Addressing skill gaps, incomplete learning, and misconceptions is a necessary and natural part of the teaching (and learning) process, although it is one with which educators have traditionally struggled. Districts have therefore faced the challenge of equipping teachers with the skills they need to identify and address learning gaps with “just in time” instruction, rather than reteaching or remediation. This is particularly important for marginalized and underserved students, and students with specialized learning needs. Students with disabilities, poor and minority students, and English language learners face some of the greatest challenges in navigating the education system during the pandemic and are at greater risk of being singled out or removed from grade-level instruction for remedial work. This systemic pattern of sidelining students with special needs irrevocably impacts the course of their educational careers, cutting them off from the content and social interaction they need to reengage in learning and grow academically. Ensuring that all students in virtual or hybrid learning

environments—or those returning to physical classrooms—have access to rigorous, engaging grade-level content is perhaps the greatest instructional and professional development challenge posed by school closures.

Finally, districts also commonly lack the appropriate processes, tools, and strategies for **accurately assessing student learning in a virtual environment**, at least at the outset of school closures. Many districts quickly found themselves scrambling for ways to replicate face-to-face assessments in virtual settings with varying success. They all acknowledge that their efforts to design and disseminate formative and summative assessments, provide adequate training for teachers in using the assessments, and apply the data to improving instruction are highly problematic given their inability to control for student independence in the home environment or provide appropriate interactive assessment tools.

PART II:

PRECONDITIONS AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Preconditions for Implementing High-Quality Professional Development

Regardless of the management approach of a system, whether highly centralized or more tilted toward site-based management and autonomy, the district has a vital role to play in providing and overseeing professional development for instructional staff and leaders at both the central office and school levels. Perhaps nowhere is this district role clearer than when we look at the preconditions necessary for building and sustaining a program of high-quality professional learning. Preconditions, for the purposes of this framework, can be defined as a cross-cutting set of organizational structures, actions, and commitments that should ideally be in place in order to support the development and implementation of high-quality professional development.

In particular, professional development programming has the best chance of improving instruction systemwide if —

- The district has defined and consistently communicated a **strong, unifying vision** for high-quality school and classroom practice built on rigorous college- and career-readiness standards, inclusivity, and high expectations for all students. This vision reflects a district’s commitment to and advocacy for instructional equity and excellence.
- The district has conducted a comprehensive **assessment of the professional development needs of all teachers, as well as instructional support staff and leaders**. This needs assessment was conducted as a collaborative, inclusive process that leveraged the expertise and perspectives of a diverse range of educators, and took into account factors such as observation data, student work and achievement data, **the technology and resources necessary and available to deliver quality instruction in an in-person, virtual, or hybrid learning environment**. It is essential that professional development planning start from this assessment of school, teacher, and student needs, rather than being driven by a revolving door of new initiatives or partnerships.
- Based on this needs assessment and the district’s instructional vision, the district has developed a **comprehensive, multi-tiered professional development plan** and has allocated the resources necessary to support and evaluate the work over multiple school years. This includes providing educators with the technology and tools necessary to support distance learning.
- The district has established a **culture of data-driven instruction**, meaning that there is an expectation that student progress data—including data from formative assessments—are regularly and systematically collected, analyzed, and used to inform decision-making in areas such as the professional development needs of teachers and school leaders.
- The district has established a **cultural norm of openness and collaboration in service of continuous improvement**. This may mean an open-door policy where teachers regularly welcome others into their classroom—whether physical or virtual—for nonevaluative peer observation, discussion, and feedback to improve instructional practice. It may also mean that the district has created structures such as professional learning communities and common planning time to provide opportunities for ongoing collaborative work and reflection—even in a virtual environment—to sustain and deepen whatever learning occurs in professional development.

- If applicable, the district has negotiated with the local teachers’ union to carve out **a sufficient amount of time throughout the school year** for the professional development, coaching, and focused collaboration of school-based personnel.
- District leadership is a highly vocal and visible champion of diversity and equity, continuously working from the top to engage staff at all levels and across central office departments, staff, and schools build a culture of **shared accountability for student achievement**. In particular, the district has communicated, reinforced, and acted on a message of collective responsibility for the academic outcomes of English language learners, students with disabilities, and other marginalized or historically underserved students.
- The district has adopted structures and policies that break down siloes and promote **strong working relationships among central office departments in support of schools**. In our extensive work with school districts, we have observed that engaging staff across departments—not only various content areas and levels such as elementary and secondary, but departments that oversee English Language Learner programs, special education, gifted and talented programs, career and technical education, etc.—is essential in planning and implementing professional development that is consistent and meets the full range of schools’ instructional needs.

An additional consideration that is both a design feature and a precondition is the need for districts to ensure broad-based teacher and leader buy-in for professional development programming. This is often one of the key reasons that districts involve representative samples or working groups of teachers, principals, principal supervisors, and other school-based instructional staff in the design, review, and selection of professional development programs or approaches. Another critical strategy for boosting understanding and support is clear, consistent communication with schools about the rationale, purpose, and intended outcomes of professional development offerings. Ideally, teachers and leaders need to not only understand the changes in instructional approach and expectations that the district is trying to reinforce with professional development (the “what”), but *why* instructional approaches need to change—i.e., the additional value that new approaches will offer that instructional standards of the past did not.

A district can also build trust and support among teachers and leaders by ensuring that professional development is aligned not only to the instructional vision and standards of a school system, but to the assessments and the evaluation of teachers and leaders. If teachers feel that professional development is irrelevant or disconnected to the challenges they face in their everyday work, the content standards they are being asked to meet, or how they are evaluated, then that professional development has little hope of changing classroom instruction in a meaningful or sustainable way.

Principles for the Design and Implementation of High-Quality Professional Development

Based on our exploration of the research and lessons from the field, as well as the process of articulating a definition of and preconditions for high-quality professional development, we can now point to a core set of design features and principles. These principles touch on the “why” (*What is the purpose of professional development? How does it serve students, teachers, leaders, and the district as a whole?*), the “what” (*What knowledge or skills should professional development provide or focus on?*), the “who” (*Who are we targeting? Who should have access to professional learning opportunities, and who should be deployed to provide and reinforce this professional learning?*), and the “how” (*How should professional development be structured, delivered, and evaluated to best improve instructional outcomes?*). Some of these principles reflect the kinds of preparation all instructional staff and leaders require to be effective in their roles, while other features and principles are more tightly focused on professional development for classroom teachers. While we don’t delve into the details of how to translate

these principles into practice until the next section, it is helpful to start out with a common set of beliefs about how professional development should be conceived, designed, and implemented in order to effectively change teacher practice and improve instructional outcomes.

The “Why”

- To begin, high quality professional development should be designed and implemented **to address both current and enduring patterns of student and teacher assets and needs** across the district. Starting from an assessment of assets and needs is a very different proposition from the initiative- or vendor-led approach to professional development planning in many districts. The process of designing or selecting professional development should therefore start from an understanding of both immediate needs arising from new modes of virtual or hybrid instruction, as well as what a district wants to achieve or change in the long term through a shift in instruction. The district should then work backward to define what kind of professional development can get them there.
- Professional development should be transparent around **change as the primary goal**. Even aside from the need to master new technologies and modes of instruction, the purpose of professional development should be to change and enhance the way teachers currently teach and have been trained to teach, sometimes over the course of long careers, to improve student achievement.
- Professional development should serve as the **mechanism for translating a district’s instructional vision and standards into practice**. To this end, professional development should be aligned to a district’s curriculum and evaluation system and build the capacity of teachers and schools to measurably improve student outcomes. It is only through the seamless integration of these components that professional development will earn the trust and support of teachers and administrators.
- Professional development should also reflect a district’s appreciation and respect for diversity, allowing a school system to deliver on its commitment to **creating learning environments that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and equipped to meet the needs of all students**, especially those who have historically been marginalized and underserved.
- As a forum for collective growth and learning, professional development should **instill all teachers and staff with a sense of community built on mutual respect, foster collaboration, and promote shared ownership of the work** at the grade, school, and even district level. While personalized coaching and support is critical to address specific, individual needs, collective professional learning is where districts create impact and change on a larger scale.

The “What”

- In order to build buy-in and widespread implementation, it is critical that professional learning address high-leverage approaches to meeting **the daily demands of instruction or school leadership** rather than focusing solely on frameworks or theory. This connection to reality is especially critical when this reality involves the new demands of virtual or hybrid instruction. Teachers—and those that support and supervise them—require real-time support and guidance on how to adjust their instruction and **effectively engage students in learning**. This involves a whole host of new skills and responsibilities, including knowing how to use technology and online learning platforms to manage a virtual classroom, how to identify signs of student distress or disengagement and rebuild a connection with them through outreach and social-emotional support, and how to strategically involve parents or caregivers, who have become not only stakeholders but partners in the work of facilitating student progress.

- However, professional development should avoid falling into the trap of simply covering teaching strategies or “tips and tricks,” particularly for students with unique needs. As much as ever, professional development should focus on **building teachers’ knowledge of content and Tier 1 instruction**, ensuring that they understand how students learn and are prepared to advance deep conceptual learning among students with multi-faceted needs.
- Professional development should also provide teachers with the skills necessary to **effectively select and employ interventions for struggling students and students with special needs in service of grade-level instruction**. Of course, in any school or district there will need to be a corps of teachers and support staff with specialized knowledge and skills for supporting students with special needs. This doesn’t take away from the fact that all teachers need to be prepared to support all of the children sitting in—or logging into—their classes.
- Moreover, the district should ensure that **professional development for specialized instructors or support staff is fully aligned to district instructional standards** and not approached as an afterthought or an undertaking outside of its primary educational mission. Specialized training should be fully incorporated into the planning and implementation of districtwide professional development, sending the message that these teachers, and the children they support, are a core priority for the district.
- Professional development should alert teachers in advance to patterns of student challenge with specific units or lessons, and it will need to equip teachers to address unfinished learning without compromising student access to grade-level content and instructional rigor. To avoid widespread remediation, professional development will need to instill the message—and provide teachers and leaders with the skills— to employ just-in-time instruction, prioritize content and learning, focus on the depth of instruction rather than the pace at which topics are covered, identify gaps in knowledge without misusing or misinterpreting data from standardized testing, and maintain the inclusion of all learners. For more information, please see *Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures* and *Supporting English Language Learners in the COVID-19 Crisis*.
- Professional development should **inform teachers about the instructional resources available to them and provide the guidance necessary to effectively use these resources to support student learning**. Particularly if teachers are engaged in distance learning and have limited interaction with peers or administrators, they might not be aware or know how to access, select, or use the wealth of materials, guides, and videos that many districts have developed to assist them in pivoting to virtual instruction.
- To the extent possible, professional development should be **data- and evidence-driven, highlighting best practices** from the field. While there is limited data currently on how to best support and improve virtual and hybrid instruction for K-12 students, districts should connect with their colleagues in other school districts to stay informed about the promising professional development programming being developed and delivered across the country, as well as other promising practices in the shared effort to strengthen instruction during school closures and beyond.
- Professional development should **instill inclusive, equitable practices**. Whether delivering instruction to a class of diverse learners or employing small group instruction, teachers should ensure that students who are struggling are not pulled out or set aside during grade-level instruction. These students, who may include English learners, students with disabilities, or students disproportionately affected by school closures or the COVID-19 pandemic, need access to robust core curriculum and the opportunity to interact and learn alongside their peers.

- To this end, professional development should **address teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs and biases concerning the capacity of all students—especially those with specialized learning needs**—to meet grade-level standards. Ultimately, student success is driven not only by the quality of instruction but by high expectations and a shared belief in the potential of all students.
- Professional development should **address any weaknesses or gaps in the district’s instructional materials** to enable teachers to identify and use high-quality resources to provide comprehensive instruction to their students, including providing annotated examples of student work and protocols for using formative assessments to monitor student progress and inform instruction.
- Professional development should also provide teachers with guidance and models for **addressing the learning needs of more advanced students**.
- Professional development should be designed to **enrich reflection and decision-making** about instructional practice. For teachers and coaches, this might mean nurturing the aptitude and insight they need to assess student needs and the progression of student thinking to tailor instruction in innovative ways. This will help to ensure that all students are engaged in rigorous learning and meet grade-level standards. It should also prepare teachers to make informed decisions in the selection or development of instructional materials aligned to college- and career-readiness standards. For school leaders, professional development should hone their role as decisionmakers on a schoolwide basis, providing them with knowledge on what to look for when observing physical or virtual classes, how to identify quality instruction and areas in need of improvement, how to assess the level of student work samples, and how to be strategic and intentional in addressing these needs in their professional development planning.
- Professional development for both teachers and leaders should provide the skills necessary to **analyze and apply data** on student needs and progress to drive instruction and planning. As mentioned above, in the aftermath of school closures and interrupted learning due to the pandemic, the ability to appropriately interpret student data is more critical than ever. The danger of misusing assessment data is discussed in more detail in *Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures* and *Supporting English Language Learners in the COVID-19 Crisis*. In sum, teachers and administrators should be careful in their use of standardized testing data, relying instead on instruction and formative assessment as a means of identifying and attending to student learning needs.

The “Who”

- Professional learning opportunities should be **widely accessible** to the entirety of the instructional workforce. This includes teachers providing instruction in English language development and specialists providing services and instruction to struggling students and students with disabilities, as well as paraprofessionals, long-term substitute teachers, and any other educator that is supporting student learning. It also includes coaches, instructional specialists, school psychologists and counselors, nurses, clinicians such as physical therapists, and school-based administrators and leaders such as assistant principals, principals, and principal supervisors. Shared professional learning that reinforces a district’s values and priorities is a vital step the district should take to instill a unified vision for instruction.
- The district should **provide parents and caregivers with real-time information and access to the guidance and resources they need to support student learning**, particularly during remote and hybrid instruction. This includes information on class schedules, tutorials on the use of technology and learning platforms, information on how to contact school or district personnel, and links to supplemental resources and materials to support or advance out-of-school student learning.

- The district should ensure that, in addition to teachers, **school leaders and instructional support staff understand the purpose and rationale** behind professional development so that they are prepared to support teachers and advance change at the school level.
- While professional development should be designed to nurture educator capacity in a systematic, intentional way over the course of a given school year (and beyond), a comprehensive professional development plan also needs to **provide new teachers and administrators with the just-in-time training** they need to support implementation of the district’s instructional vision, curriculum, and standards from their first day.
- Professional development should be provided by practitioners or experts who are equipped with **deep content and pedagogical knowledge** as well as expertise in **leading adult learning**. Where train-the-trainer models are employed, districts should ensure that the individuals tapped to relay professional development at the school level not only have the necessary content proficiency and pedagogical content knowledge, but are sufficiently prepared to support the learning of their peers.
- Coaches or other instructional support staff should be deployed to provide **hands-on, targeted support and feedback**. Staff in these roles should be carefully vetted, consistent in their messaging and methods, and receive the professional development *they* need to continuously hone and refine their own practice to help teachers and leaders grow in their practice.

The “How”

- Professional development needs to be **differentiated** to meet the needs of teachers and leaders with different skill sets and levels, and at different points in their career. This should not come at the cost of rigor or alignment to district instructional standards, but rather reflect the unique—and evolving—professional learning needs of educators, particularly as they confront the new challenges of mastering remote and hybrid instruction.
- Professional development should be designed to **develop progressively more sophisticated knowledge and skills over time**. This not only serves to develop teacher capacity, but also to **keep talented teachers in the field** by ensuring that they continue to learn and grow in their profession and in their ability to adapt their planning, instruction, and assessment practices in multiple learning environments.
- Professional development should be provided and reinforced through a **tiered system of support**. In addition to professional development offered at the district level, there should be professional learning opportunities and **follow-up support** provided at the zone and school levels through professional learning communities (PLCs); regular zone, school, and department meetings; common planning time; and timely personalized coaching.
- Professional development should be approached in a manner that is **respectful of teachers and school leaders as professionals**. It is clear that when districts try to invest in “teacher proof” training/materials—such as overly scripted instructional materials—it is the antithesis of a meaningful or effective investment in teacher capacity and professional growth.
- Professional development should not be a one-time occurrence, but rather a carefully orchestrated, **ongoing process of learning**. The design and implementation of professional learning should be driven by the recognition of the time necessary for deep and lasting changes to take root. Authentic learning requires that teachers and leaders have sequenced and intentional opportunities to **reflect on their practice** and develop the agency to change the lives of students.

- Professional development should involve **job-embedded work**, with **actionable, real-time feedback and immediate applicability** in a classroom, school site, or distance learning environment. To further ensure buy-in, participants in professional development should be familiar with the theory of action or rationale for the district taking this particular instructional approach over another.
- Professional development should promote the **active engagement** of each participant. Traditional “show and tell” or “sit and get” forms of imparting information were always flawed, and are even more inadequate during the current crisis. Providing teachers with meaningful opportunities to interact with their peers and mentors and to reflect on their practice is vital at a time when teachers or staff may feel isolated or cut off from the school community due to school closures.
- The level of intensity of professional learning should be significant enough to **promote the productive struggle of teachers and leaders** as they work through problems of practice. It is important that participants are not only challenged but supported in the process of grappling with new approaches and concepts in multiple learning environments.
- In practice, this requires the **cross-functional coordination** of various central office departments and staff—including principal supervisors—in planning and implementing professional learning opportunities that not only equip teachers and other school-based staff with the necessary knowledge and skills, but that create a culture of shared ownership for the outcomes of all students.
- **Evaluation should be a foundational consideration** in the design and implementation of professional development. This means evaluation should be addressed from the outset, not as an afterthought. Quantitative and qualitative evaluation metrics should be collected throughout the professional development cycle and track both what is meaningful in terms of instructional quality and student achievement, and what can be tied to professional development programming.
- Districts should also consider the time it will take for change to take root and **commit to sticking with the professional development plan** for a sufficient amount of time to gauge its full impact on teacher practice and student growth, even if results are not immediately evident.
- At the same time, the district should collect and incorporate **feedback from users** to leverage teacher and leader perspectives and expertise and effectively address any unforeseen design flaws or challenges that arise in the implementation of professional development.
- **Partnerships with external providers** of professional development should be carefully vetted to ensure that they **build—rather than diminish—internal district capacity**. Such partnerships should be both initially and regularly assessed for their impact on teacher practice and student achievement, as well as their alignment to district priorities and sustainability over time.

PART III:

DISTRICT EXEMPLARS

The following is a set of exemplars of professional development programs and strategies from big city school districts. This collection of exemplars aims to cover a range of potential areas of interest to the reader—professional development for classroom teachers and for school leaders, professional development across content areas, examples that illustrate the “what,” “who,” “how,” and “why” of professional development, examples that provide a high-level look at how districts use professional development to communicate instructional vision and priorities, and those that delve into the nuts and bolts of improving classroom instruction. Each exemplar is accompanied by a brief description, as well as an icon to indicate the targeted audience or level of a particular strategy or program.



Indicates professional development at the classroom level



Indicates professional development at the building level



Indicates professional development at the system level

The reader is invited to click on the links provided in order to review the exhibits first-hand but should keep in mind that these are only edited snapshots of any given professional development resource. The intent is to provide guidance, not a template.

Finally, it is important to note that these exemplars were chosen not because these districts have perfected professional development programming, or because these approaches would work in every context or for every district, but because they provide a real-world illustration of some of the underlying principles of effective professional development identified in the previous section. Providing the support and training that teachers need to drive student success—particularly in a new and challenging online learning environment—is still a shared work in progress for all schools and districts. But these programs provide a concrete look at the thoughtful approaches and promising practices being rolled out in school systems across the country.



Exemplar 1:

Denver Public Schools' Acceleration of Unfinished Learning for School Leaders

Denver Public Schools is fully focused on responding to the crisis that has caused students and teachers to move between in-person and remote learning environments, disrupted the mental and social emotional well-being of all stakeholders, and made even more challenging and urgent the need to address unfinished learning and learning loss for all students, prioritizing those with the most acute needs. The district is guided in their response by three “crisis priorities,” each prioritizing marginalized students. The three priorities address: (1) health and safety; (2) social emotional and mental health; and (3) addressing unfinished learning. The district has taken an optimistic stance, maintaining high expectations for all students, while reimagining how the district might leverage their new learning to move forward the shared commitment to becoming an “equity school district.”

[Acceleration of Unfinished Learning](#), professional learning for leaders who support teachers, is designed to align to the current district focus areas and leverage the limited base of knowledge regarding unfinished learning. The content is both practical and immediately applicable to leaders’ role in supporting the professional learning of teachers at their site (*slides 26–28*). Soliciting input from external partnerships (i.e., Council of Great City Schools, Student Achievement Partners) eliminates isolation and leverages national best practices to address the content (*slides 2, 11*). The focus and objectives for the workshop are embedded in the opening (*slides 3–5*) along with the shared definition of equity instruction (*slide 6*). There are intentional pauses for participants to reflect and share, allowing for processing time and collaborative learning (*slides 13, 20, 29*). Follow up opportunities and resources for leaders’ ongoing just-in-time learning are scheduled and communicated (*slides 32, 36*).



Exemplar 2:

Chicago Public Schools' Instructional Priorities Module

Chicago Public Schools has pivoted to respond to shifts in learning environments (remote, in-person, hybrid) and anticipated unfinished learning due to current conditions. While there are changes to the “way we do school,” the district focus remains steady on core values and what teachers and leaders need to know to support all students. The district’s vision of being an “equitable, inclusive, supportive and responsive district that provides high-quality education for every child” is deliberately and strategically called out in all professional learning efforts.

This can be seen in the district’s [Instructional Priorities Module](#). This module is a just-in-time professional learning response to unanticipated changes. The content addresses a “multitude of learning demands” situated in remote, hybrid, and potential in-person learning environments (*slide 5–8; 31*). In addition to recognizing the multiple learning environments for students, the professional learning for teachers is flexible (e.g., synchronous, asynchronous) with opportunities for participants to engage and reflect as individuals and as teams (*slides 29–30*). Outcomes are stated and align to the content (*slide 31*). The training begins with an empathetic acknowledgement of current conditions and transitions from “what we don’t know” to “what we know” and “how do we respond.” The district’s shared instructional vision and equity forward commitments to all students are called out as the goals and guide for teachers’ and leaders’ ongoing learning (*slides 10–15*). There is a year-long professional learning plan that is sequenced to deepen all teachers’ knowledge and skill in planning, facilitating, and sustaining grade-level instruction (*slides 20–26*). The plan includes role-specific modules and optional deep dive modules to provide differentiated learning. The deep dive strands are offered based on multiple site-specific data (*slide 27*).



Exemplar 3:

Long Beach Unified School District's Technology and Digital Pedagogy Training

The use of technology to support alternative learning environments has been an evolving practice in the Long Beach Unified School District, with varying degrees of expertise among teachers and leaders. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis the district had developed a comprehensive synchronous and asynchronous professional development system which for many teachers was their first introduction to technology. There were strong cadres of early adopters at most sites, using applications such as *G Suite* to facilitate collaboration, deliver innovative lessons, and assess student learning. However, the unanticipated and immediate pivot to remote learning highlighted significant knowledge and skill gaps ranging from low-level use of hardware to effective digital pedagogy. Recognizing the potential risks of unfinished learning, especially for under-represented students, including English learners and students with disabilities, the district quickly launched an “all-in” program of professional learning for digital instruction during the initial weeks of school closures.

Recognizing the need to differentiate and personalize the learning for varying levels of proficiency, the [first week of learning](#) focused on the basic features of the *G Suite* applications, recommended for any teacher or leader who self-identified as a technology novice. The [training content](#) for each application was designed to be as accessible and user-friendly as possible, using step-by-step instructions and screenshots to illustrate each feature. Data from the learning sessions indicated that many attendees needed additional ongoing support as they navigated the change to remote learning. A peer coaching model, “Digital Mentors,” was created to match volunteer teachers who were more advanced users of technology with novice teachers. A novice teacher self-identified or was referred to the program and then paired with a volunteer who coached the teacher in the use of the hardware, applications, and digital pedagogy. While there was no remuneration for the volunteers, the numbers far exceeded the need. In order to support these volunteers, [onboarding training](#) was provided. The onboarding included support materials for the *G Suite* applications, but more importantly, provided focused training on the skills needed to build and nurture the “mentor-mentee” relationship.

While knowing how to access applications is foundational, high-quality remote instruction requires significant shifts in pedagogy. To connect the shifts in pedagogy to the familiar instructional moves and elements of the district’s teaching and learning framework (“Understandings”), a [Digital Pedagogy Overview](#) was created to illustrate and emphasize the coherence and continuity of instruction in alternative learning environments. The Digital Pedagogy exemplars for six *G-Suite* applications ([Classroom](#), [Docs](#), [Forms](#), [Jamboard](#), [Meet](#), [Slides](#)) reflect the delivery and modeling of effective pedagogical moves (such as introducing a concept, making meaning of a text/task, checking for understanding, providing feedback, collaborating, differentiation, etc.). Teachers and leaders participate in a virtual environment similar to what they would then create for their students. Visuals are used to illustrate the application ideas. There are also multiple opportunities for participants to ask questions, suggest ideas, and share personal examples.



Exemplar 4:

Denver Public Schools' *How to Teach Phonics So It Sticks*

Denver Public Schools has identified structured, evidence-based reading instruction, anchored by phonics instruction, as a strategic approach to their goals of rigor and equity. The [How to Teach Phonics So It Sticks for Teachers](#) exemplar situates an equity forward commitment in phonics instruction. The equity focus is clearly identified, calling out the “why” and the desired outcomes (*slides 3-7, 21*). Prior learning is referenced to connect key ideas (*slide 8*). The content of the professional development is immediately applicable to the classroom and actionable (*slides 11-13, 18-19, 25-27*). Supports and scaffolds for all English learners with explicit guidance for and connections to Spanish phonics to enhance access to the core curriculum without diminishing the rigor of the learning are intentionally called out (*slides 14-20, 30*).

A [Note-Taking Tool](#) follows the delivery of the content. The tool facilitates active learning and serves as a reflection and reinforcement resource. There are many opportunities to interact with the content and multiple prompts for teachers to apply their learning (*e.g., pages 6, 8*).

Moreover, there is a companion resource for school leaders entitled [Rigorous Foundational Skills Instruction in Service of Equity](#). Administrators are provided the same content to ensure consistent messaging of what effective phonics instruction looks like in classrooms. There is a differentiated focus on their role in supporting and empowering teachers to deliver equity forward rigorous foundational skills instruction (*slides 8-15*). Supports and scaffolds for all English learners with explicit guidance for and connections to Spanish phonics to enhance access to the core curriculum are also shared with administrators (*slides 23-28*).

In addition, the [Foundational Skills Tool for Administrators](#) provides additional learning for administrators to enhance their coaching role at the school site. There are evidence-based descriptions of rigor in the text and task to build administrators knowledge and skills of high-quality implementation of the content. The tool can serve as a guide to classroom observations (*e.g., “look fors”*) as well as a framework for coaching conversations with teachers.



Exemplar 5:

Guilford County Schools' 3Ls™ Courses

Guilford County Schools (GCS) serves a diverse population of students who, as a whole, speak more than 100 different languages. After analyzing ELL achievement data and EL program exit patterns, the district identified the need to reduce the number of long-term English learners and to increase English Learners' daily rigorous interaction with complex and compelling text. To achieve these goals, the district's English Learner (EL) Department collaborated with the Council of Great City Schools to pilot newly developed courses on the 3Ls™ (“Learning, Language, Literacy”) approach during the 2017-18 school year. Starting in SY 2018-19, the EL Department adopted the 3Ls approach for all ELL teachers and planned for year-long professional learning cycles. Critical to the move from pilot status to full-scale implementation was evaluation, planned in advance, and aligned to the initial goals of the professional learning.

The 3Ls approach includes a framework for lessons that are anchored in Essential Questions that drive instruction via rich grade-level talk and tasks. These talk and tasks are centered around grade-level content in the context of complex and compelling texts. The collaboration included a program of professional learning courses for teachers developed by the Council in partnership with language and literacy experts Maryann Cucchiara and Lily Wong Fillmore.

The [3Ls™ Building Instructional Capacity](#) exemplar provides an overview of the research-based instructional elements of the 3Ls approach and guidance on planning and implementation. The professional learning took place with cohorts of teachers, combining in-person facilitation with online content, including video of teachers implementing the framework elements. The “why” or purpose of the learning is demonstrated through an essential question, data, and an example of student work (*slides 6-7, 20, 27-29*). The professional learning plan was based on adult learning theory that includes multiple opportunities to learn new content, apply that content, and reflect and revise in a non-evaluative environment (*slides 11-12*). Central to the plan was the development of an instructional planning guide for participants to practice, pause in order to process, plan, and reflect on the new learning in a collaborative setting (*slides 13, 24, 26*). Acknowledging changes in perception (qualitative data) from previous professional learning also highlights the purpose and outcomes desired (*slide 31*).

The district’s commitment to a peer coaching model was the key to effective implementation of the professional learning plan. The EL Office assigned four ELL Coordinators to facilitate the professional learning, using the online courses, and to work with assigned teachers as coaches in follow-up sessions. ELL Coaches visited classrooms on a mutually agreed upon and predictable schedule to provide ongoing feedback and support to teachers using the “Instructional Framework Focused Observation” tool (*slide 26*). The EL Office also developed a monthly digital ELL Newsletter through which exemplary videos, lessons, and tips are shared with ELL teachers. The district EL Office closely monitored the implementation and questions raised by teachers that allowed the coordinators to pivot and re-visit an area when it was clear that course correction was needed or when teachers requested additional help.

The district’s Research and Evaluation Department and the English Learners Department jointly planned and published an evaluation of the program, [The EL 3Ls Framework Implementation Report](#). Data were collected from teachers and school principals via surveys, focus groups, and observations (*page 2-3, 15*). The evaluation focused on two essential questions. The first essential question addressed the effectiveness of the sequential professional learning program (*pages 4-5, 11*). The second essential question focused on the implementation of the program and the use of the new learning over time (*page 3, 11-12, 16*). The evaluation of the ongoing support described above (i.e., coaching support, observations, feedback, and newsletters/blogs) were included in the data (*pages 5-6, 12*). The interconnected goals of professional learning, teacher confidence, and student success were also included in the evaluation, along with teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of student engagement and learning (*pages 8-10 13-14, 17*). Teachers’ use of new learning and confidence in their instruction were measured via quantitative and qualitative measures (*pages 7-8, 17*). The evaluation allowed the district to identify teachers’ needs for ongoing learning and support. The evaluation provided the district actionable data to pivot, refine, and strengthen the 3Ls Framework professional learning program for subsequent deployments.



Exemplar 6:

Newark City Schools' Early Childhood Pre-K Professional Development

The Newark City Schools Office of Early Childhood Pre-K Program advocates for and prioritizes professional learning to improve and increase the capabilities of staff, build and maintain morale for staff members, and attract higher quality staff. To support these priorities, the department has developed a professional learning plan aligned to the district's short- and long-term instructional goals. The goals are measurable and address (1) high-quality instruction; (2) academic and social-emotional skills; (3) health and well-being; (4) attendance; and (5) family engagement. Each of these goals is supported by discrete teacher professional learning modules, monthly professional learning community data-focused meetings to support planning for intentional instruction, and workshops presented by internal partners (e.g., nurses, health professionals).

The various year-long plans are differentiated by role (e.g., teacher, administrator, paraprofessional, families). Recognizing that all Pre-K teachers should have shared and consistent professional learning, a sequenced year-long plan is deployed annually for [All Teachers](#).

There is also consideration for the needs of teachers at different points in their career. The year-long plan for [New Teachers](#) provides onboarding for new teachers, including teachers new to the grade level or new to the district. Building on prior learning and experience, there is also a year-long plan for [Veteran Teachers](#) that includes modules that “refresh,” “review,” and “build on the foundation” of knowledge and skills these teachers have developed.

In addition to these professional development offerings, the school district has recently established an online resource center for Pre-K teachers, administrators, and support staff. The development of this online portal came from classroom observations and the identification of early childhood resources as an area of need across the district.



Exemplar 7:

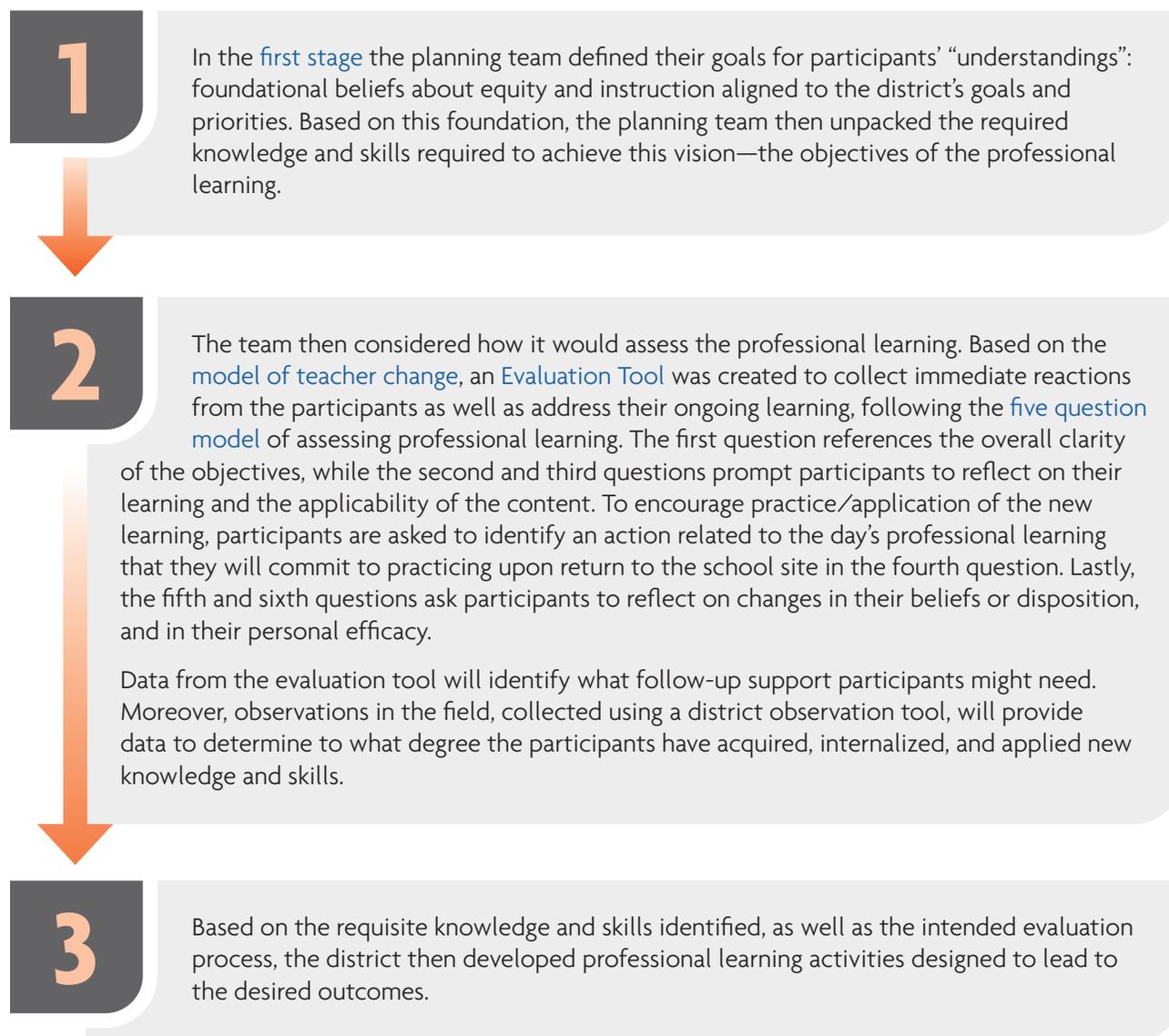
Long Beach Unified School District's Backward Planning Process

The need for equity-forward instruction in Long Beach Unified School District came from a needs assessment the district conducted in 2017. Specifically, [student empathy interviews](#) were conducted with the aim of informing effective instructional practices and relationships between teachers and African-American students in mathematics. The findings from these surveys moved the district to expand the use of [empathy interviews](#) to others, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents to develop a shared understanding of equity forward instruction, which were then incorporated into the district's “LBUSD Understandings,” a tool that describes effective classroom practices and desired elements of pedagogy across all district classrooms.

The district then employed the *Understanding by Design* framework to develop professional learning in service of this goal. The framework identifies three stages: desired outcomes, assessment, and learning experiences. This is often referred to as “backward planning,” or planning with the end in mind by first clarifying the intended learning. Using a backward planning process helps eliminate the common pitfall of beginning to plan professional learning by listing “activities” with only a general sense of the intended outcomes. District-level teams thus begin their planning process for professional learning with the “the end in mind,” asking six [guiding questions](#) concerning student and teacher outcomes. Once the outcomes are identified, the planning process moves on to planning the assessment of the professional learning, identifying both the short-term and

long-term indicators. Finally, professional learning activities are designed to build the knowledge and skills that have been identified as critical to achieving the desired student and teacher outcomes.

The following illustration of this process in action comes from a district-wide focus on equity-forward instruction—in this case, content literacy at the middle school level.



[Instructional Excellence: Building Collective Efficacy for Literacy Instruction](#) is the professional learning experience that was developed using the backward planning process referenced above. This professional learning connects to the prior year’s learning priorities, bringing together the themes of collaborative teams, literacy, and equity-instructional excellence (*slides 5, 13*). There are multiple active learning opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of instructional equity and literacy (*slides 9, 12, 20, 35, 37, 47*). The content intentionally situates literacy as an equity gatekeeper (*slides 13-19, 53*). The focus on collective efficacy is embedded by modeling various grouping and activity structures throughout, including dedicated time for school teams to reflect and apply their learning (*slides 49-52*).



Exemplar 8:

Boston Public Schools' Math Facilitator Training

Boston Public Schools first launched a teacher-leader professional development initiative focused on increasing the conceptual content and rigor of elementary math instruction and student work. It has now been expanded to address middle and high school mathematics instruction. The training builds on a clear vision for what constitutes quality instruction in mathematics while developing a shared understanding of how teachers can work collaboratively and be supported to improve teaching and learning. Annually, approximately 100 classroom teachers serve as “math facilitators” who provide job-embedded coaching support during the school day in their building. There is additional funding for the math facilitators to provide limited, additional support outside the school day. The math facilitators attend training sessions four times per year as part of their collaborative capacity-building and to ensure shared understanding and alignment to district practices. District planning includes considerations for principals as well as teachers and facilitators. All math facilitators follow the same instructional practices and use the same tools to track planning meetings, goals, and tasks with the building administrator.

These three sample professional development sessions illustrate how Boston differentiates for audience and purpose:

The [Math Facilitator Training for Teacher-Leaders](#) is the foundational resource for the beginning-of-the-year math facilitator professional development. It is designed to build both the coaches' content knowledge and coaching strategies (*slides 10-15*). Anticipating and responding to students' misconceptions and potential errors are built into the active learning (*slides 27-34*). There are multiple opportunities for participants to practice, pause in order to process, reflect, and share the new learning in a collaborative setting (*slides 15-19; 22-25; 35-36*). The content focuses on high-quality evidence-based math practices and pedagogy, with an emphasis on equity and access for diverse students (*slides 9-11*).

The [Math Facilitator Training for Administrators](#) is presented to those administrators who have an assigned facilitator at their site. The training addresses the same content and pedagogical knowledge that is provided for the facilitators to support the administrators' site coaching role and communicate the same messaging (*slides 8-20*) of district math instruction. There is also a video of math standards expert Phil Daro explaining how and why a teacher can utilize incorrect student solutions to a problem to deepen the mathematical understanding of every student in the class, so principals will recognize the value of this process in classrooms. There is additional content specific to the administrator to facilitate a collaborative partnership (*slides 6-7; 21*) with their math facilitator.

The [Math Facilitator Planning Meeting Notes](#) clearly detail the expected tasks for the facilitator to establish the collaborative relationship at the site. There is also reference to the facilitators sharing their work with one another. Moreover, there is an ongoing sequence of learning for the facilitators that supports the building of their own capacity. This reflects follow-up and monitoring of the work expected of the facilitator.



Exemplar 9:

New York City Department of Education's Re-envisioning Learning Series

The New York City Department of Education has developed a robust just-in-time professional learning series addressing the “unprecedented challenges” of multiple learning environments. The series addresses four key tenants of blended learning: learning platforms; data-informed decision-making; shared and inclusive curriculum; and instructional models. In this series, the term “blended learning” refers to leveraging technology to personalize instruction, using technology and multiple sources of data in both online and in-person (brick and mortar) environments. Within this blended environment, the Department has prioritized the continuity of instruction and unfinished learning. While the series was developed as a response to the current fluctuating school year, the focus is on new and innovative instructional strategies to support diverse learners within inclusive learning spaces for the immediate present and the future.

The [Blended Learning Re-envisioning](#) exemplar is the second part in an ongoing series of professional learning for leaders, titled “Re-envisioning School.” The series is driven by four key tenets which are referenced as prior learning connections (*slides 6, 14*). Guiding questions are used to engage participants in the active learning of the content: unfinished learning; blended learning pedagogy with a focus on marginalized students; and modifying curriculum to be more culturally relevant (*slides 7, 10, 12*). Opportunities for participants to pause and reflect and link the new learning to the prior module are included. Research-based guidance and resources from external partners are included to provide participants quality follow-up content (*slides 16, 19–20*).



Exemplar 10:

St. Paul Public Schools' Summer 2020 Principal Professional Development

St. Paul Public Schools has prioritized personalized professional learning to transform instructional practices “in order to eliminate racially predictable disparities in achievement and accelerate the achievement of all students.” In service of this goal, the district provided principals a two-day professional learning institute focused on the interconnected goals of high-quality mathematics instruction and equity forward, culturally responsive teaching. These dual goals for the professional learning institute are supported by research-based experts in best practices for mathematics instruction (i.e., Jo Boaler, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) and equity-based instruction (i.e., Zaretta Hammond).

The [Summer 2020 Principal PD](#) presentation exemplar is a component of the district’s comprehensive ongoing ten-year professional development plan for mathematics and science (*slides 13–14*). Given the unexpected need to immediately transition to virtual professional development, the planning team adapted their previously planned in-person learning experience. The presentation begins by situating the new learning in the context of the district’s balanced math program and referencing prior learning (*slides 7–12*). Anticipating that the math content and/or pedagogy of the presentation might challenge participants without prior content-specific knowledge, their productive struggle is supported by the professional learning delivery. Multiple media, asynchronous learning, and technology are used to engage participants in active learning (*slides 18, 36–37, 60–61, 71, 73, 80, 83–84*). The active learning is further supported by opportunities to reflect, practice, share and ask questions (*slides 19, 20–21, 38, 45, 55, 70–73, 85*). Acknowledging the unanticipated need to quickly pivot to remote learning, principals are presented with options for continuing support (*slides 31–35*). At the conclusion of the first day, participants are asked to submit wonderings or needs for

clarification to the presenters which can be addressed at the beginning of day two, personalizing the content and reinforcing shared messaging (*slides 38, 40*). The moral imperative or “why” is addressed by both evidence-based research (*slides 15-17, 78*) and practical application in the classroom (*slides 27-28, 69*). The district math department leveraged and integrated “... culturally relevant instruction to help students connect to the content and discover the true meaning of why they are learning the mathematics.” A powerful “next step” could include the pairing of a math coach with an administrator to observe instruction, providing a safe and supportive venue for administrators to increase their instructional proficiency in mathematics.



Exemplar 11:

Denver Public Schools’ Professional Learning for Coaches

To address unfinished learning, with a focus on culturally responsive instruction, Denver Public Schools has developed a professional learning sequence for math coaches and teachers using a “Unit Internalization” approach. The district defines unit internalization as focusing “. . . on how to craft the right conditions to foster independent learners in our classrooms.” This professional learning is designed to support coaches and teachers to develop a deep understanding of the mathematics and a vision of how students will grow and engage in the unit. Internalization requires and equips teachers to facilitate experiences that center on students as mathematicians rather than simply conveying information. Math coaches who work with teachers are provided professional learning that emphasizes that both coaches and teachers need to take the time to understand the content themselves in order to flexibly respond to and center participant (student) voice.

The [Unit Internalization Leader Guide](#) exemplar for coaches is anchored in the core curriculum and textbook, referencing researched-based instructional pedagogy for mathematics. The guide and professional learning experiences are designed to intentionally address educator mindsets in the context of mathematical conceptual knowledge and procedural skills and application not just for students, but for coaches and teachers. This is the internalization that equips teachers to foster independent learners. The Guide is structured around essential questions (*pages 7, 11*) such as “How will we ensure that all students have access to rigorous grade-level content?” Guidance to address and accelerate students’ unfinished learning for the unit is based on the model of prioritizing the essential grade-level content while providing just-in-time scaffolds. To do so, teachers are prompted to apply their internalized knowledge and processes to “Understand, Diagnose, and Take Action” (*page 13*) prior to and during instruction.



Exemplar 12:

Los Angeles Unified School District's Future Ready PD

In an effort to ensure LA Unified educators possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to work in a distance or hybrid learning environment using a variety of digital tools and resources, the Division of Human Resources and the Division of Instruction partnered to launch the [Future Ready](#) Certification program. This 30-hour professional development was offered for a stipend to all educators in Spring of 2020, and approximately 13,000 teacher leaders and administrators opted to participate. The Future Ready professional development focused on the T-PACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) model—an approach designed to help teachers understand how their technological, content, and pedagogical knowledge domains intersect in order to effectively teach and engage students with technology, and where deeper learning occurs to serve diverse student populations.

Program content was created and delivered through a collaborative effort across six LA Unified divisions: Human Resources Division; Division of Instruction; Information and Technology Division; Division of Special Education; Student Health and Human Services; and Parent and Community Services. This resulted in a professional learning opportunity that specifically addresses the needs of a diverse range of teachers and leaders, as well as the students they serve.

For example, the Division of Special Education led the development and facilitation of [Module 3: Access and Equity](#). This module focused on the effective use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an instructional methodology to ensure all students are able to access the curriculum by eliminating barriers to learning. Specifically, participants explored how issues of equity and access impact blended learning and how digital learning experiences should align to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to engage all learners. In addition, the module led participants through an examination of specific examples of accessibility features within a UDL framework to meet the needs of a variety of diverse learners.



Exemplar 13:

San Diego Unified School District's Professional Learning Communities

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, San Diego Unified School District invested a considerable amount of time, planning, and resources in Professional Learning Communities. While PLCs in many districts can amount to little more than staff meetings around planning, administration, or assessments, in San Diego they provide an opportunity for teachers and leaders to advance their understanding of content and district standards; to leverage the units that they are using with students to discuss goals, evidence of student learning, and language routines; to collectively develop school-based interim assessments; and to engage in collaborative problem solving around issues of student need. San Diego's process of building this strong PLC culture involved outreach and messaging around the purpose of PLCs, regular monitoring, and training and modeling for school leaders in how to effectively run PLCs focused on content, data, and student work.

For example, monthly PLCs in the area of secondary mathematics in the 2019-20 school year focused on [examining and planning for upcoming Illustrative Math units](#); fostering math language routines; exploring purpose, pedagogy, and observable evidence; and sharing and refining [equitable assessment and grading practices](#). The district also introduced a protocol implemented throughout their PLCs to [build a community of mathematics learners](#) across the district and within virtual classrooms. To monitor the quality and impact of the math learning for educators, the district employed the District Essential Mathematics Indicators (DEMI) Assessment as a metric for examining progress towards the district math vision over time. Moreover, regular

coaching helped to sustain and reinforce the professional learning. Teachers participating in the math PLCs, for instance, were supported by weekly coaching support from a central office math coach.

The quality, focus, and consistency of PLCs allowed the district to quickly and effectively support educators in the pivot to distance learning when schools were closed in the Spring of 2020. During this time, virtual PLCs for secondary math educators sustained their focus on examining upcoming math units and translating these units into daily lessons, while offering guidance for teachers in addressing unfinished learning with just-in time supports. More intensive support was offered throughout April of 2020, then shifted to a monthly schedule of virtual cross-site PLCs bolstered by ongoing “office hours” and individualized coaching support. These virtual PLCs also continued to offer teachers an opportunity to [collectively examine and discuss student work](#), while incorporating a new emphasis on formative assessment and grading for equity.

In fact, in many ways the shift to virtual PLCs allowed the district to expand its reach. For example, in the 2019-2020 School year the district was implementing a train-the-trainer pilot targeting a select group of 12 teachers for implementing quality curriculum resources that emphasized math language routines and focused on the review of student work. But in the shift to online learning, they were able to expand access to more than 450 secondary mathematics teachers, their co-teachers, and instructional specialists.

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