

# Why PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT Matters



Hayes Mizell

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**Why professional development matters**

By Hayes Mizell

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## FOREWORD

“Another professional development day! What an inconvenience!” This comment rings across kitchen tables, through grocery store aisles, on the sidelines at soccer games, and in the breakrooms in local businesses. Parents expect their children to be in school and rely on schools not only for educating them, but also for providing a safe and dependable place for students to be each day. Families and even employers are inconvenienced on inservice days or when the school day starts late or ends early to provide time for teacher professional development.

For business and community leaders, the quality of a community’s education system relates directly to the economic success of the community. School success translates into tax revenues, real estate values, and community satisfaction. When asked what they want for their children, parents, and community members overwhelmingly agree that they want the best teacher possible in every classroom. Research confirms that the most important factor contributing to a student’s success in school is the quality of teaching. While parents may not be familiar with the research, they are united in their desire to ensure great teaching for every child every day. Professional development is the most effective strategy schools and school districts have to meet this expectation.

Professional development is the strategy schools and school districts use to ensure that educators continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career. The most effective professional development engages teams of teachers to focus on the needs of their students. They learn and problem solve together in order to ensure all students achieve success. School systems use a variety of schedules to provide this collaborative learning and work time for teachers. When time set aside for professional development is used effectively and parents receive reports about student results, they realize the benefits to teachers and their students far outweigh the scheduling inconvenience. When

communities see their schools making steady upward progress, they applaud the role of effective professional development.

Policymakers, community leaders, and parents have a responsibility to ensure that educators within their schools engage in continuous professional learning and apply that learning to increase student achievement. Learning Forward offers a clear definition and standards for measuring the quality of professional development occurring within schools. By advocating for educator professional learning that meets these standards, policymakers, parents, and community members can do their part to ensure a successful education experience for every child in their community. John Dewey reminds us about the importance of this role: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children.”

–**Stephanie Hirsh**  
Executive Director  
Learning Forward

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hayes Mizell is Learning Forward’s senior distinguished fellow. Mizell’s sharp insistence on establishing the link between student achievement and school improvement strategies, including professional development, has made him a respected voice in school reform. Formerly the director of the program on student achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Mizell has a rich history of advocacy work within and beyond education.

## INTRODUCTION

Professional development refers to many types of educational experiences related to an individual's work. Doctors, lawyers, educators, accountants, engineers, and people in a wide variety of professions and businesses participate in professional development to learn and apply new knowledge and skills that will improve their performance on the job.

Many fields require members to participate in ongoing learning approved by the profession, sometimes as a requirement for keeping their jobs. Professionals often also voluntarily seek new learning.

In education, research has shown that teaching quality and school leadership are the most important factors in raising student achievement. For teachers and school and district leaders to be as effective as possible, they continually expand their knowledge and skills to implement the best educational practices. Educators learn to help students learn at the highest levels.

Many people may not be aware of their local school system's methods for improving teaching and student learning. Professional development is the only strategy school systems have to strengthen educators' performance levels. Professional development is also the only way educators can learn so that they are able to better their performance and raise student achievement.

Many misunderstandings exist about professional development, its purpose, and how it functions. This publication is an effort to answer basic questions and to inform and engage more people in strengthening the quality and improving the results of professional development.

## THE BASICS

### **What** constitutes professional development?

When people use the term “professional development,” they usually mean a formal process such as a conference, seminar, or workshop; collaborative learning among members of a work team; or a course at a college or university. However, professional development can also occur in informal contexts such as discussions among work colleagues, independent reading and research, observations of a colleague’s work, or other learning from a peer.

### **How** does professional development in K–12 public education differ from professional development in other fields?

In public schools, effective professional development affects students. Student learning and achievement increase when educators engage in effective professional development focused on the skills educators need in order to address students’ major learning challenges.

### **Are** there other names for professional development in schools?

People often use other names, including staff development, inservice, training, professional learning, or continuing education. Whatever the term, the purpose is the same — to improve learning for educators and students.

### **Why** do educators need professional development? Didn’t they learn what they need to know in college?

College and university programs cannot provide the extensive range of learning experiences necessary for graduates to become effective public school educators. Once students graduate, meet their state’s certification

*Whatever the term, the purpose is the same — to improve learning for educators and students.*





requirements, and are employed, they learn through experience. As in all professions, new teachers and principals take years to gain the skills they need to be effective in their roles. The complexity of teaching is so great that one-third of teachers leave the profession within three years and 50% leave within five years (Ingersoll, 2003). Even experienced teachers confront great challenges each year, including changes in subject content, new instructional methods, advances in technology, changed laws and procedures, and student learning needs. Educators who do not experience effective professional development do not improve their skills, and student learning suffers.

*Educators who do not experience effective professional development do not improve their skills, and student learning suffers.*



### **Why do new educators need extra support?**

New teachers juggle an overwhelming number of unfamiliar issues, such as classroom management, instruction, curriculum, school culture and operations, test preparation and administration, state standards, parent relations, and interactions with other teachers. Left to themselves, they may develop counterproductive behaviors. With extra support, however, new teachers learn more effective practices to apply to daily challenges. Additional support also helps districts retain new teachers and set them on the path to becoming effective educators. Many school systems provide mentors and induction programs for novice teachers. These programs are required in many states for teachers to earn a professional license. Most importantly, research shows that new teachers who received intensive mentoring had a significant effect on student achievement after as little as two years (Strong, Fletcher, & Villar, 2004; Serpell & Bozeman, 1999).

### **Do new principals need the same kind of extra support as new teachers?**

New principals and assistant principals, just like new teachers, benefit from ongoing learning when they assume their new roles. Knowing district, state, and federal policies, laws, and procedures requires substantial time for study

and application. Districts support new principals and assistant principals with additional professional development and by assigning mentors.

**Do principals have separate professional development from teachers?**

Principals who are instructional leaders often choose to participate in professional development designed primarily for teachers so that they can support its outcomes. In addition, principals need professional development to address their specific roles and responsibilities. This professional development usually occurs in separate venues. Many experts believe principals do not have adequate access to professional development related to their roles as school leaders.

**Is there professional development for parents?**

While some schools and community agencies may provide training for parents of school-age children or parenting education, schools generally do not provide professional development for parents and focus instead on professional development to improve students' education.

**When do public school educators typically engage in professional development?**

Professional development is most effective when it occurs in the context of educators' daily work. When learning is part of the school day, all educators are engaged in growth rather than learning being limited to those who volunteer to participate on their own. School-based professional development helps educators analyze student achievement data during the school year to immediately identify learning problems, develop solutions, and promptly apply those solutions to address students' needs. Professional development also can be useful if it takes place before classes begin or after they end.

*Professional development is most effective when it occurs in the context of educators' daily work.*



Professional development may occur:

- During the regular school day;
- At school, but before classes begin or after they end;
- After school on an educator's own time;
- During days a school system sets aside solely for professional development; or
- During the summer and other school breaks.

### **Where** does professional development typically occur for educators?

Educators benefit most by learning in the setting where they can immediately apply what they learn — in the school where they work. However, other professional development may occur at:

- An educator's school district office or professional development center/school;
- A third-party site such as an education service center, corporate office, or learning center;
- Another school, school system, state, or a foreign country;
- A college or university (summer or evening courses, or institutes);
- Local, state, or national conferences, seminars, or workshops; or
- Online.

### **Why** can't educators just use online professional development?

Online professional development can be useful for learning content and even observing video demonstrations of effective teaching or leadership. Some online professional development also provides interactive, real-time discussion among participants and an expert.

*Educators benefit most by learning in the setting where they can immediately apply what they learn — in the school where they work.*



However, there are limitations to online professional development:

- The professional development may not relate to the specific learning challenges of an educator's students.
- An educator learns in isolation rather than as a member of a team where participants learn from colleagues' expertise, experience, and insights.
- Educators' collective growth has a greater impact on student learning across the school than individual learning does.
- No one will know whether or how well an educator applies his or her learning to benefit students.

### **What** are typical modes of professional development?

- Individual reading/study/research.
- Study groups among peers focused on a shared need or topic.
- Observation: teachers observing other teachers.
- Coaching: an expert teacher coaching one or more colleagues.
- Mentoring of new educators by more experienced colleagues.
- Team meetings to plan lessons, problem solve, improve performance, and/or learn a new strategy.
- Faculty, grade-level, or departmental meetings.
- Online courses.
- College/university courses.
- Workshops to dig deeper into a subject.
- Conferences to learn from a variety of expertise from around the state or country.
- Whole-school improvement programs.
- Proprietary programs by private vendors.

*...there are limitations to online professional development.*



## ENSURING QUALITY LEARNING

### **What** is effective professional development?

Effective professional development enables educators to develop the knowledge and skills they need to address students' learning challenges. To be effective, professional development requires thoughtful planning followed by careful implementation with feedback to ensure it responds to educators' learning needs. Educators who participate in professional development then must put their new knowledge and skills to work. Professional development is not effective unless it causes teachers to improve their instruction or causes administrators to become better school leaders.

*Unfortunately, many educators responsible for organizing professional development have had no formal education in how to do so.*



### **How** do educators make sure professional development is effective?

The effectiveness of professional development depends on how carefully educators conceive, plan, and implement it. There is no substitute for rigorous thinking and execution. Unfortunately, many educators responsible for organizing professional development have had no formal education in how to do so. The learning experiences they create for others are similar to their own experiences, many of which were neither positive nor effective. **Learning Forward** is a professional organization that provides resources and learning opportunities for educators to develop the knowledge and skills they need to organize effective professional development. Visit the **Learning Forward** website at [www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org).

### **What** does effective professional development look like?

In effective professional development, a leadership team analyzes student achievement data to identify learning problems common to students in a

particular grade or class, determines which problems educators have the most difficulty addressing, and investigates what they need to know and do to be more successful in helping students overcome learning challenges. Next, all educators are organized into learning teams. Many educators serve on more than one learning team. Each team has a skilled facilitator to guide the team in establishing and pursuing learning goals. Teams meet during the workday at their school two or three times a week. Districtwide teams are sometimes organized by grade or subject to focus on systemic matters. In team learning, less experienced educators interact with and learn from more experienced educators on the team. As all educators on the team become more skillful, they reduce or eliminate variations in performance and begin to take collective responsibility for the success of all students, rather than just their own.

### **What is a learning team?**

On a learning team, teachers and school leaders work together to use data to understand what students are not learning and to find instructional gaps, then determine what they need to learn to help close those gaps. Learning team members next set out to learn what they need to know and do to improve. They may work with a knowledgeable person from the school system's central office, with a successful teacher within the school or from another school, with an expert from a local college/university or education service center, or with a consultant. Team members also might engage in self-directed learning such as conducting research, observing effective instruction perhaps at another school, or attending a conference or workshop. The team allows time, likely over the course of many weeks, to make sure educators' learning is intensive. Their professional development is more relevant when they are able to analyze and discuss with their team members what they are learning and their experiences in using what they learned. They engage in an ongoing cycle of improvement.

*Learning teams...  
engage in an ongoing  
cycle of improvement.*



### **How long are learning teams together?**

A team will stay together as long as members have a mutual learning goal. After a team completes its learning, members are ready to apply their new knowledge and skills in their classrooms or other work places. Team members incorporate the skills into lesson plans and determine how members will know whether student learning is improving. They share experiences applying the learning. They ask questions such as: What worked well? What did not? What evidence exists that students are performing better in response to educators' new skills? Do educators need more learning or practice? District, school, and teacher leaders may observe educators' new practices and offer feedback. If educators' experiences applying new knowledge and skills indicate that they need to learn more, the team initiates another round of professional development. This cycle of continuous improvement ensures that educators are constantly working to become more effective in addressing students' learning problems. As members of a team hone their skills, other educators may begin to adopt these new best practices, and success can spread throughout the school and even from school to school.

*A team will stay together as long as members have a mutual learning goal.*



## HOW SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS MAKE IT HAPPEN

### **What** factors determine the professional development in which educators participate?

A school system may believe that to meet its education goals, all educators in the system or educators who work at a particular school or grade level are required to participate in professional development the system designs. This usually occurs when the school system is implementing a new program such as a new reading or mathematics curriculum. Some systems design school-based professional development so that most learning happens at the building level. After analyzing student data and educator needs, the school's leadership team or principal may encourage or direct teachers' professional development to help the school meet its goals. If a school principal determines that a teacher's performance is inadequate, the principal may insist that the teacher participate in professional development. Likewise, if a principal's supervisor determines that he or she needs additional professional development, the supervisor can require it.

In addition to district or school-initiated professional development, some educators take the initiative to engage in professional development they believe is necessary for them to meet goals, such as earning a master's degree; credit toward recertification; new knowledge and skills to better serve their students; or additional qualifications to prepare for another position such as teacher leader. A school or system may or may not pay for professional development that educators seek on their own.

*A school or system may or may not pay for professional development that educators seek on their own.*



### **How** do schools find time for professional development?

Schools can schedule time for educators' learning in many ways. For example, some arrange daily schedules to allow for common planning times when



teachers can meet during the workday. Districts may hire substitute teachers to allow teachers to meet in learning teams or to observe peers. Others fund stipends for teacher learning outside the regular workday. Districts may “bank” time, allowing educators shorter workdays and combining the extra minutes for a block of professional development. Many add professional development time to teachers’ required work year. Most districts have specific days within the school calendar when students are released and educators spend time learning.

*Learning during the school year makes it easier for educators to apply what they learn immediately within their work places so that students benefit immediately.*



### **Why** do schools close, start late, or dismiss early for professional development?

When educators engage in professional development at their schools with their colleagues, they can learn from each other, support one another, and hold each other accountable for applying what they learn. Learning during the school year makes it easier for educators to apply what they learn immediately within their work places so that students benefit immediately. Summer institutes for educators may supplement school-based professional development when the institutes last for a week or more and a team of educators from the same school attends. The institute’s impact is increased when participants then meet regularly during the school day to review what they learned and support one another in implementing new practices.

### **How** much should my school system spend on professional development?

In its *Standards for Staff Development*, Learning Forward “advocates that school districts dedicate at least 10% of their budgets to staff development and that at least 25% of an educator’s work time be devoted to learning and collaboration with colleagues” (NSDC, 2001). Also, Learning Forward advocates that at least 30% of the technology budget be devoted to teacher development. The average percentage most districts spent on professional

development is 1% to 3% (Miles et al., 2004). In addition, the federal government requires that 10% of Title I funds for underperforming schools be allocated to related professional development.

### **How** is money for professional development spent?

The answer varies tremendously. For example, if an educator attends an out-of-state conference, costs will include registration, transportation, lodging, and meals. If a school or school district organizes the professional development, costs may include paying for a consultant, materials, and perhaps substitute teachers. Other costs include salaries for coaches and mentors, stipends for teachers' work outside the workday, or supplies and resources for professional learning. Through creative scheduling, a school might arrange for small teams of teachers to engage in team-directed professional learning several times within the workweek to limit costs. If a teacher, for example, observes another teacher in the same school and discusses the experience, costs would be minimal.

*...the federal government requires that 10% of Title I funds for underperforming schools be allocated to related professional development.*



### **Does** it make a difference how much is spent on professional development?

Spending more may allow for greater intensity: higher quality, more time for learning, and more follow-up support as educators apply their learning. While more expensive professional development does not guarantee it will be more effective, professional development on the cheap will almost certainly have little or no impact (Jacob & Lefgren, 2002). What matters most is how the professional development is planned and implemented.

### **Where** do schools get the money for professional development?

School systems typically use a combination of local, state, and federal funds for professional development. Some state and federal grants require

*If administrators become better leaders and teachers become more effective and apply what they learn so that students achieve at higher levels, professional development is worth the cost.*



or permit school systems to use a portion of the funds for professional development. School systems may also seek funding from local, state, or national foundations. Most school districts and schools designate funding for professional development in their local budgets. Some school systems and states even require that a certain percentage of their budget be allocated to professional development.

### **How** does a school system or school determine the value and results of professional development?

Professional development yields three levels of results: (a) educators learn new knowledge and skills because of their participation; (b) educators use what they learn to improve teaching and leadership; and (c) student learning and achievement increase because educators use what they learned in professional development. The results of professional development can be assessed through techniques such as surveys, tests, observations, video recordings, and interviews. If administrators become better leaders and teachers become more effective and apply what they learn so that students achieve at higher levels, professional development is worth the cost.

### **What** role does a school board play in professional development?

The school board establishes written policies that describe the board's philosophy about professional development, its purpose, and guidelines for its operation. (For example, see this page from the Iowa Association of School Board website <http://www.ia-sb.org/StudentAchievement.aspx?id=458>). In addition, school boards may call for annual reports or evaluations of the district's professional development plan to ascertain the impact of the district's investment. School board members also should engage in their own professional development to help members understand the practices of high-performing boards and to better understand their role in ensuring effective professional development for all employees.

**What** roles do state, provincial, and federal governments play in professional development?

Most states have laws that require school districts to provide a minimum number of days of professional development, and states provide some funding for this purpose. Canadian provinces also address this requirement. States also may require periodic professional development as a condition for educators to renew their license. Many federal education grant programs provide professional development funding. Federal programs usually include guidelines for state and school district professional development. Some federal agencies also provide direct professional development experiences.

*Many federal education grant programs provide professional development funding.*



## THE DIFFERENCE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MAKES

*Teachers and administrators who routinely develop their own knowledge and skills model for students that learning is important and useful.*



### **How** does professional development benefit my school?

All schools should be places where both adults and students learn. Teachers and administrators who routinely develop their own knowledge and skills model for students that learning is important and useful. Their ongoing development creates a culture of learning throughout the school and supports educators' efforts to engage students in learning. A school that organizes team-based professional development and expects all teachers and administrators to consistently participate — though for different purposes, at different times, in different ways — demonstrates that it is serious about all educators performing at higher levels. As a result, the entire school is more focused and effective.

### **How** does professional development benefit my student?

Good teaching is not an accident. While some teachers are more naturally gifted than others, all effective teaching is the result of study, reflection, practice, and hard work. A teacher can never know enough about how a student learns, what impedes the student's learning, and how the teacher's instruction can increase the student's learning. Professional development is the only means for teachers to gain such knowledge. Whether students are high, low, or average achievers, they will learn more if their teachers regularly engage in high-quality professional development.

School leaders too improve with study, reflection, practice, and hard work. Their learning supports not only teachers' learning, but students' as well. When leaders know how to engage teachers, support staff, and students in effective learning, the school becomes the center of learning for all adults and students.

### **Why** should the public be concerned that teachers have professional development?

Professional development provides ongoing opportunities for educators to continue to improve their knowledge and skills so they can help students achieve. When educators learn, students learn more. Anyone concerned about their students' futures will want to support a cycle of continuous professional growth for educators.

Everyone has a role in ensuring that educators can take part in effective professional development. Parents and citizens must demand and support intensive, high-quality professional development that results in better teaching, improved school leadership, and higher student performance. School boards must have policies that make clear that the purpose of professional development is to increase learning of both educators and their students, and boards must hold educators accountable for achieving results. School system administrators must encourage and support each school in taking responsibility for professional development and must provide the time and facilitation for educators to learn what they need to know to address students' learning problems. Educators who organize and facilitate professional development must understand what student learning needs educators are having difficulty meeting. Finally, throughout their careers, teachers and administrators must conscientiously engage in professional learning to develop the knowledge and skills to improve student performance.

*When educators learn, students learn more.*



### **Why** are there so many complaints about professional development?

Those responsible for organizing professional development often do so in ways that alienate rather than energize and assist educators. Those organizing the professional development may not be clear about specific improvements in educator and student performance that should result, or may not carefully determine what steps will lead to the desired performance levels. In addition, educators often complain that they are required to participate in

professional development that does not address the real challenges they face in their schools and classrooms. They resent “one-size-fits-all” professional development that targets large numbers of educators from very different schools and classrooms who have students with different needs. Also, the professional development may not consider educators’ varying levels of motivation, interest, knowledge, and skill. Poorly conceived and ineffectively implemented professional development leads to complaints.

Nevertheless, there is no shortage of information about school systems and schools that organize professional development effectively and achieve impressive results. Where professional development is organized well, educators value it rather than complain about it.

*Poorly conceived  
and ineffectively  
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## ABOUT LEARNING FORWARD

**What** is Learning Forward and how can it help individuals who have additional questions?

**Learning Forward** is an international association of learning educators who share a single purpose: *Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.* Members of this community are committed to professional learning to improve schools and student learning. The organization's website, [www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org) provides additional information about programs, conferences, publications, and services. Parents, school board members, policymakers, and citizens may join and access valuable information about improving professional development.

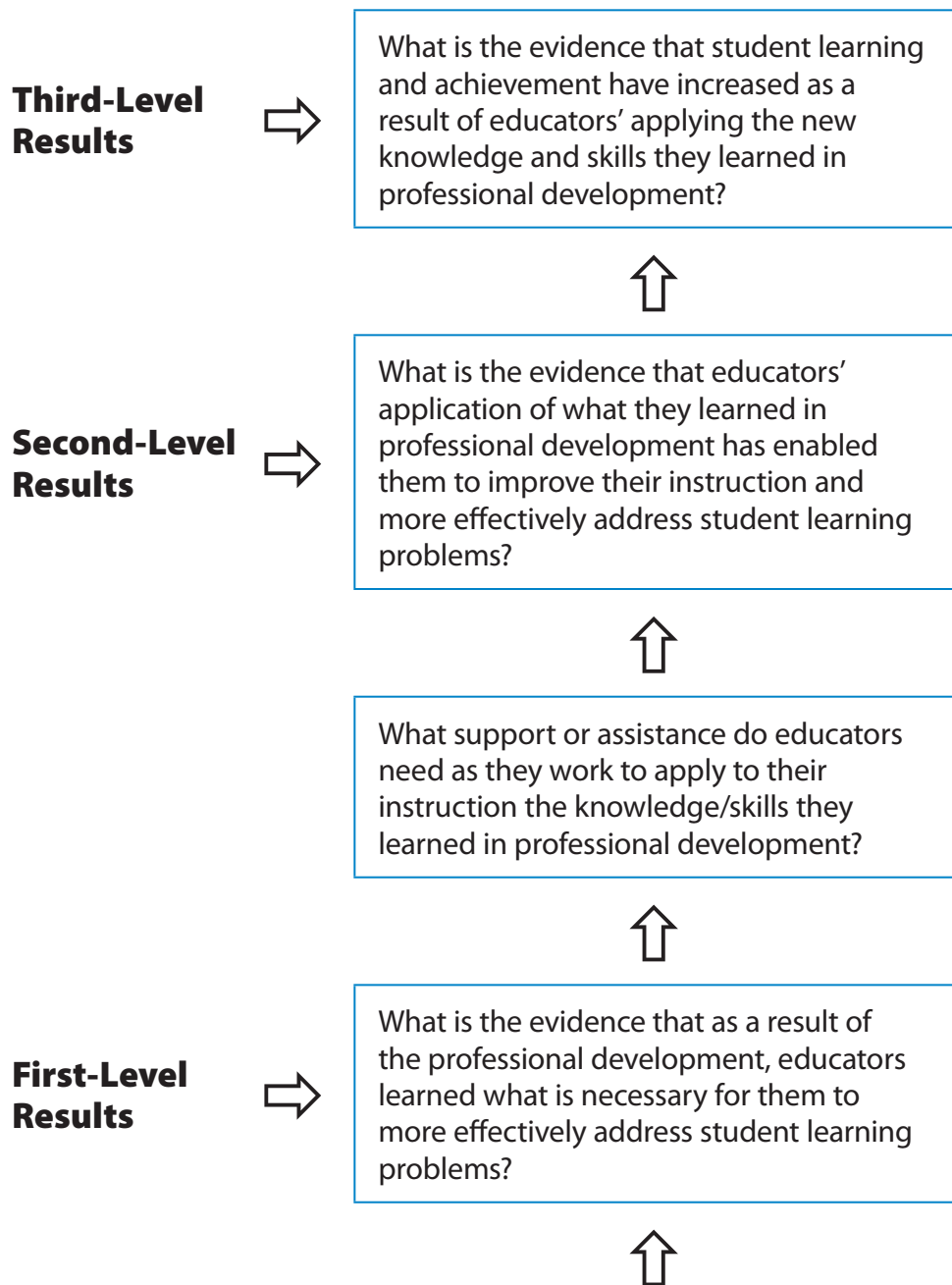
*Every educator  
engages in effective  
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student achieves.*

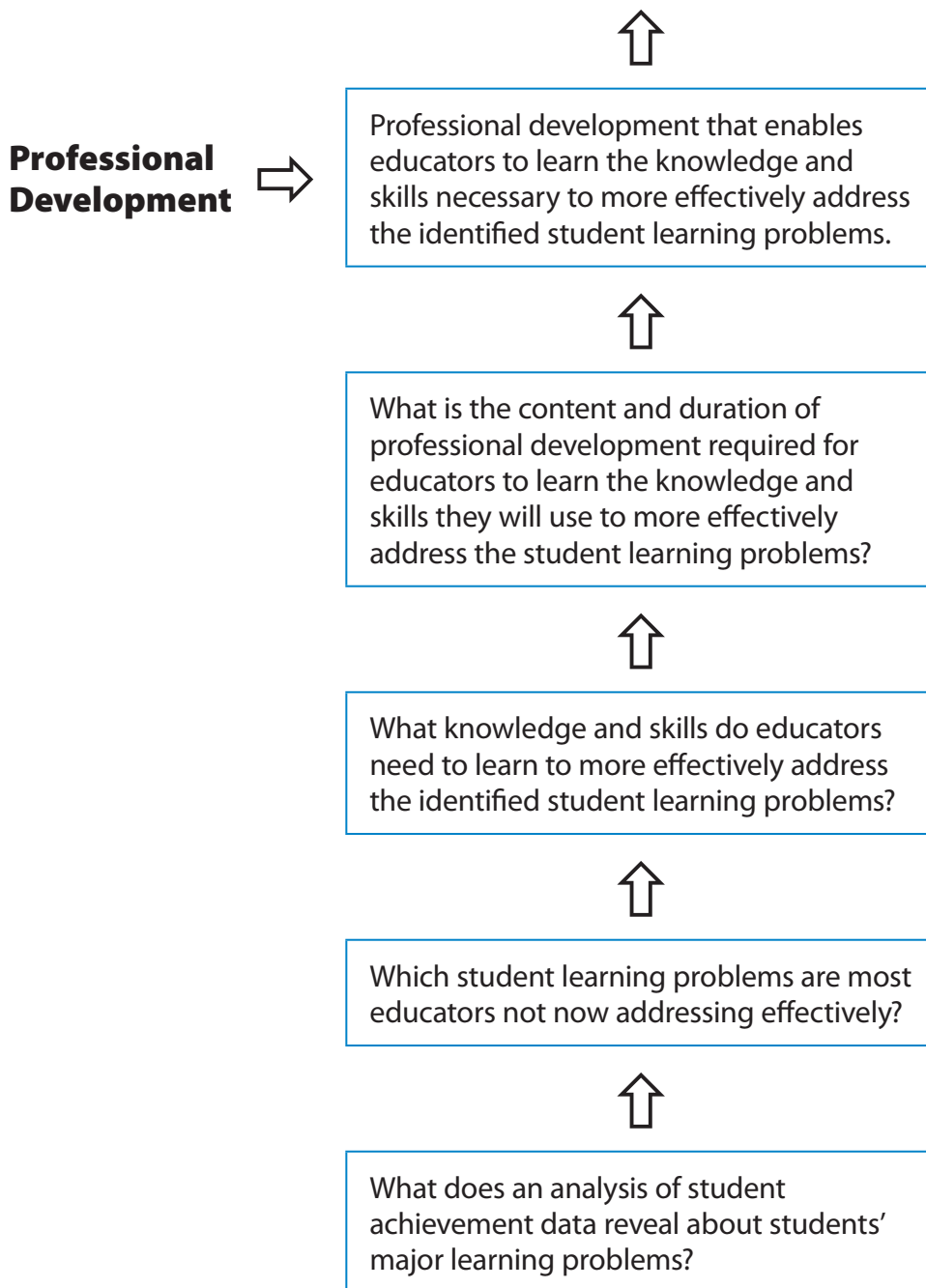




## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

*in Conceiving, Organizing, Implementing, and Evaluating Professional Development*





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Learning Forward is the new name of the National Staff Development Council. We are an international association of learning educators committed to one purpose in K–12 education: *Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.*

*Why professional development matters* is also available online for free download:

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