

SEIZING THE MOMENT:

# State Lessons for Transforming Professional Learning

## Introduction

**No one expects change to be easy.**

**B**arely into the second decade of the 21st century, education leaders are challenged as never before to increase student achievement and prepare every student for college and careers.

With newly designed assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards about to be field tested on a massive scale and with educator evaluations dependent on student performance on these new assessments, educators must have the content and pedagogical knowledge to translate new standards into rigorous, authentic, and engaging learning experiences.

Teachers will need to be supported and engaged in ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that will help them learn to effectively:

- Implement curricula built on the Common Core standards;
- Use data and knowledge from new assessments to guide their teaching and address instructional problems;
- Engage in authentic learning environments that replicate the learning environments they must create for their students to implement new standards; and
- Embrace the use of efficient, flexible, personalized technology solutions that can accelerate student learning.

Principals and other school and district leaders also need specific kinds of professional learning so that they are ready to provide constructive, frequent feedback and personalized, team, school, and district support to teachers and teacher leaders.

Supporting educators to implement the Common Core will be no easy lift. It will require moving educators past initial engagement to systems transformation, shifting mindsets about what students are capable of and transforming learning environments, and helping educators connect technology to instruction as never before.

Although the responsibility for professional learning lies primarily with districts and schools, state education leaders can seize the moment to help create a more coherent, comprehensive, and sustained statewide professional learning system that is so essential to student success.

This process begins with strong leadership at the state level to ensure consistent focus, target resources where they are needed, and support strong leadership roles in professional learning at the central office and building level. Central office leaders must identify the needs of teacher and school leaders and provide the vision, coupled with aligned and equitably distributed resources, that school-level staff need to make the shifts the new standards require. At the school, effective school leaders promote professional learning that is school-based, data-driven, collaborative, and focused on results.

Equally important, state leaders must work together across agencies and departments to establish a coherent policy framework that advances more effective approaches to professional learning; establishes the conditions and expectations for success; and leverages resources and effort throughout the system.

## Core Professional Learning Policy Elements

State leaders need to create an explicit framework for a comprehensive system in legislation and state school board regulation represented by the following core elements, drawn from research about linkages among policy, teacher professional learning, and student learning.

These elements were tested by Learning Forward as part of its *Transforming Professional Learning to Prepare College- and Career-Ready Students: Implementing the Common Core* initiative, the source of information for this brief.

Policy Elements	Description
Vision/function of professional learning as a part of education system.	Describes the vision, mission, and beliefs for effective professional learning and its relationship to educator effectiveness and student achievement.
Definition of professional learning to establish common understanding and practice.	Defines professional learning and positions it as a comprehensive system of improvement, occurring continuously, and engaging educators in collaborative learning primarily at their worksite with additional opportunities outside their worksite.
Standards for professional learning to establish quality indicators.	Delineates research-based standards for professional learning that are used to monitor and measure effectiveness, efficiency, and equity in the professional learning.
Ongoing assessment and evaluation with data.	Requires formative and summative evaluation of the equity, effectiveness, and efficiency of professional learning for both accountability and improvement.
Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, including teachers, principals, central office, regional agencies, state agency, etc.	Delineates the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders and other contributors to effective professional learning.
Resources (e.g. time, staff, technology, funding, and materials) for ensuring effective professional learning.	Requires set-aside and/or adequate funding to ensure application of learning to achieve full implementation and other resources such as staff, technology, and materials to increase access to, efficiency of, and effectiveness of professional learning.

A state professional learning system may begin with only the core components in place, but a comprehensive system is strongest when all components are clearly articulated and integrated into policies and practices across all functions of the department of education where professional learning occurs. By working collaboratively with stakeholders to establish a compelling vision, articulate a clear, research-based definition of professional learning, and adopt the Standards for Professional Learning, state leaders set the conditions for a policy context conducive to a comprehensive professional learning system that will enable full implementation of the Common Core standards.

This policy brief underscores the importance of a coordinated state professional learning strategy, adoption of professional learning standards, the value of assessing the quality of professional development being used, and strategies for leveraging state leadership to drive improvements at the regional and district level.

It highlights lessons learned and recommendations emerging from the *Transforming Professional Learning* initiative. This effort is an ongoing, seven-state initiative led by Learning Forward in partnership with the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

At the center of the project, Kentucky—which has already in place a statewide infrastructure to support educator effectiveness, was the first state to adopt the Common Core Standards and among the first to use aligned assessments—has served as a demonstration state to create a model system of professional learning that:

- Directly addresses the Common Core State Standards;
- Ensures the standards are used to enable teaching and learning that prepares students for college and/or careers;
- Is sustainable over time; and
- Can be replicated in other states.

Six “critical friend” states (Georgia, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Utah, and Washington) worked collaboratively with the KDE, Kentucky educators statewide, four Kentucky districts that were district implementation partners, Kentucky policymakers, and education advocates to create and implement a comprehensive system of professional learning.

Launched in October 2011 and continuing through June 2013, the project was designed to proceed through three stages: establishing the vision and implementation framework, adopting and implementing the policies and practices envisioned, and diffusing innovations that are part of the transformed system.

A state Professional Learning Task Force, comprised of a broad section of education leaders and practitioners, was given broad authority to design, debate, recommend, revise, and reflect. Members mastered the history and context of the system they were transforming, proposed recommendations, and grappled with policy considerations. Meeting frequently over 10 months and working together

online and via teleconference, the Task Force developed common understandings of previous professional development practices and policy, drafted clear definitions of terms and precise descriptions of processes, and studied implications of each recommendation. It played a crucial role in building support across the state.

By the end of October 2012, the Task Force recommended a comprehensive professional learning system that includes a vision, definition, and standards for professional learning. In establishing a vision and redefining professional learning, Task Force members have set keystone elements for a transformation of thought and action in professional learning across the state. The recommendations are expected to be integrated into new legislation and proposed state school board regulation.

Not everything has been accomplished yet. Factors that contributed to slower-than-anticipated progress included:

- Other state priorities, particularly introducing a new state professional growth and effectiveness system;
- A limited legislative session;
- The need to more thoroughly define the vision of job-embedded professional learning among Kentucky educators; and
- The additional work of integrating the revised professional learning policies and support structures with other major reforms underway at the same time.

Marshaling change that includes multiple state and local stakeholders, and that strikes deeply into the daily practices of educators, also has to build on previous structures, history, processes, and context, which takes time to do with care.

**This brief synthesizes some key findings from the Kentucky R&D project led by Learning Forward and its partner organizations with funding from Sandler Foundation, MetLife Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.**

### **Partners**

Learning Forward collaborated with the Kentucky Department of Education and national association partners, including the Council of Chief State School Officers, National Governors Association, National Association of State Boards of Education, and American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. With representatives from six “critical friends states,” Georgia, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Utah, and Washington, the partners worked with Kentucky educators statewide, and in four districts that were district implementation partners.

## Lessons [re]learned about Transforming Professional Learning

The following section summarizes key lessons from Kentucky for other states about linking between policy and practice to support professional learning in the context of significant education reforms related to rigorous content standards, student assessments, and educator effectiveness systems.

### 1. Academic success for all students requires more than Common Core State Standards.

Teaching related to the new standards demands that teachers possess deep understanding of the outcomes expected and the pedagogy required. It is far from simply “learning the standards.” Kentucky sought to synchronize policy and practice in professional learning. As Kentucky Leadership Networks deployed a statewide approach to professional learning designed to build local and regional educator capacity to drive changes in practice required by the Common Core, state leaders recognized that current policy and the new practices were out of sync. The revised vision for Kentucky professional learning seeks integration of the new standards through professional learning that includes developing educator knowledge and skills while also supporting collaborative, continuous, job-embedded approaches to improving student success such as analysis of student work and changes in classroom practices.

### 2. Complex shifts in accountability, standards implementation, teacher evaluation, and professional learning need to be fully integrated to be successful.

The adoption of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards was accompanied by state participation in the *Race to the Top* grant competition and associated reforms in the Kentucky student assessment system, Professional Growth and Effectiveness System, new teacher induction and mentoring, school accountability, and other significant education policies. With so many moving parts, the state’s Professional Learning Task Force had to consider how its recommendations would affect the Professional Growth and Effectiveness System and its related instructional support system and educator development suite, which were being developed simultaneously and by a different entity. The Task Force also had to consider what cross-system support and accountability structures must be created or changed in order to make the policies work. Knowing that these systems would be “fit” together in the implementation phase by the state education department and by local educators, the Task Force questioned assumptions and thought carefully about how to recommend that the definition of professional learning be revised, supported, and implemented.

### 3. The success of professional learning policies that connect directly to the daily professional lives of educators requires educator engagement in their design, implementation, and ongoing refinement.

Kentucky’s efforts to transform professional learning reinforced that policy and practice are intimately connected and reciprocal. That is, educators simultaneously inform policy making by identifying the conditions needed to support their success and serve as advocates, facilitators, and leaders of policy

implementation. Policymakers create the *conditions* for continuous educator learning and accountability, but implementation of policy requires *operations* aligned with an expanded definition of job-embedded professional learning. These operations are educators' responsibilities. Professional learning policy, therefore, must be informed by educator practice, which affects the policy and the structures that support it. And because of its new statutory definition in Kentucky, professional learning will be deeply embedded in educators' daily professional norms, classroom and school practices, and work with students. The Task Force, Teacher Advisory Council, and State Core Team made up of representatives from stakeholders within Kentucky used their practical experiences to shape the policy recommendations and will serve as advocates for transformed professional learning.

#### **4. Building long-term support for changes in state professional learning system requires substantial, authentic and long-term engagement of key stakeholders, especially teachers.**

Kentucky's Task Force benefitted from strong representation from KDE, particularly from the Office of Next Generation Learning, members of the Teacher Advisory Board, the Kentucky Education Association, Kentucky School Boards Association, Kentucky Superintendents Network, regional Leadership Networks, Kentucky Educator Professional Standards Board, Kentucky universities, and local school district administrators. During the months of work, the Task Force helped create initial champions of the policy recommendations across the system. At the same time, teachers were relatively late to, and lightly represented in, the process. It is possible that policy may have moved more broadly and more quickly if more classroom educators were central to the process. To achieve success with revised professional learning policy, the level of stakeholder engagement evident in the Task Force must be complemented by internal education department policy coordination and stakeholder coordination during the implementation phase. Participants and leaders might achieve such stakeholder participation by engaging the Task Force to review progress, provide feedback, support implementation, and guide course correction throughout implementation.

#### **5. Educators need to be lead communicators about changes in professional learning policy change.**

The new definitions, policies, and associated support structures for professional learning depart significantly from prior practices and definitions with similar names. Consequently, communication about the changes is challenging and best done by educators involved in the reform. Creating opportunities for educators to experience new professional learning strategies is an important part of communicating about and developing an understanding of what the new definition means. For example, Kentucky recommendations include additional time for educator learning, not adding more professional development measured by seat time, but rather creating school day schedules that support collaborative, job-embedded collaborative professional learning focused on implementing student content standards and measured by effective educator practice and student success. Engaging educators in authentic professional learning as defined by the new vision, definition, and standards helps demonstrate how it works in practice and should be part of the strategy for supporting the ongoing implementation of a comprehensive system of professional learning. In addition, this engagement

builds a cadre of educator advocates who share the power of transformed professional learning and lead its implementation among their peers. Through this practice, educators are better able to articulate what transformed professional learning is, how it influences educator practice, and how it affects student learning.

**6. States must first build consensus around professional learning policy if they are to sustain current and future education reforms.**

Investing in defining and building consensus about the vision, definition, and standards for effective professional learning establishes a solid foundation for sustaining the current and future education reforms. As time passes and priorities change, educators will need opportunities for continuous support of current reforms to refine and expand implementation. A comprehensive professional learning system that is deeply integrated into other statewide systems for educator and student success includes sustained and differentiated support to achieve full implementation. A comprehensive professional learning system establishes the framework for effective professional learning necessary to achieve individual, team, school, district, or state improvement goals and to support implementation of any future initiative requiring change in educator practice.

**7. Significant change requires a shared vision, collaborative effort, and distributed leadership.**

The Commissioner of Education authorized the Professional Learning Task Force, provided clear authority to an associate commissioner to convene the Task Force, and provided timely and clear reminders of the vision for the Task Force. The commissioner was not a solo voice for the vision. Rather, he joined with the legislature, state board of education, local education leaders, education agencies, organizations interested in education, institutions of higher education, and educators across Kentucky to develop collaboratively the vision and are working to implement it. In Kentucky and elsewhere, similar efforts will require sustained, collaborative leadership from state department of education division heads, associations and other state, regional, and local education organizations including districts to address all relevant systems, support successful implementation models, and work across traditional spheres of action.

**8. Intelligent application of technology increases efficiency, effectiveness, and equitable access to professional learning and instructional supports for increased educator effectiveness and student learning.**

When administrators, teachers, and teacher leaders choose appropriate technologies that support individual, team, school, and district goals, state content standards, district and classroom curricula, student assessments, and student and educator learning needs, they find that educators' daily work and collaborative efforts more effectively promote student success. Technology exponentially broadens the range of resources available to educators, allowing for personalized support for each educator. Kentucky's web-based integrated instructional support system and educator development suite provide personalized, just-in-time supports for educators aligned with content standards and educator performance standards. Technology facilitates communication among educators; moreover, it expands collaboration and collective responsibility for student success. Using data systems

technologies, educators seek and receive data, feedback, support, and resources to increase their effectiveness. Technology increases “anytime-anywhere” professional learning, although not every state and school system has yet implemented technology systems that provide access to high-quality professional learning and instructional supports. If states leaders fail to implement such technology systems, they limit educators’ access to resources that would increase their individual and collective effectiveness.

## Conclusion

State education leaders, like those in Kentucky, reaffirm their commitment to academic success for all students through full implementation of Common Core State Standards and educator effectiveness systems. They know that reforming education to meet the promise implied by new standards means transforming professional learning for teachers, school leaders, and teacher leaders. Such massive systems change is fraught with complexity and opportunity. Reform-minded leaders can seize the moment to strengthen their education systems by creating policy contexts that are supportive of new models of professional learning. The *Transforming Professional Learning* Initiative offers the following lessons for state education leaders:

- Strong leadership starts at the state level and is distributed at all levels of the system.
- Leaders and participants must build a consensus about professional learning policy.
- State leaders must work across agencies and departments to establish a coherent policy framework that advances more effective approaches to professional learning.
- Elements of a comprehensive system of professional learning must be reflected in legislation and state school board regulation, including:
  - Vision
  - Definition
  - Standards of professional learning
  - Evaluation
  - Roles and responsibilities
  - Resources (e.g. time, staff, technology, materials).
- Education stakeholders, especially teachers, must be engaged in authentic ways over the long haul.
- Educators, especially teachers, must be empowered to lead communications about the need for policy changes related to professional learning.
- Technology systems are investments to support and track implementation.

Transforming professional learning systems to support full implementation of Common Core standards will be a heavy lift. But state education leaders, practitioners, and stakeholders are willing to make it—for the futures of all students.