

THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OF TEACHERS

Why is Professional Learning important?

What teachers know, do and believe has a major influence on what students learn. If we are to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools we must invest in the learning of teachers. This learning should support the growth of the individual as well as contribute to the realisation of the goals and priorities of the school and the system.

What is Professional Learning?

A teacher's professional learning journey is an ongoing process of inquiry into, and reflection on their practice, punctuated by learning activities and programs designed to enhance their professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This process of growth and development provides opportunities for teachers to examine and challenge their assumptions about their role, experiment with teaching strategies and develop a deeper understanding of their subject content, the students they teach and how their students learn.

In the current context of educational reform in Victoria the professional learning of teachers is recognised as a key component of building the capacity of teachers that will result in improvement in student outcomes. The 'Essential Learnings' curriculum framework, aligned with refined approaches to assessment and reporting and underpinned by the 'Principles of Learning and Teaching' create new expectations for teacher practice and student performance. As teachers do not learn all that they need to learn in their pre-service education they must seek out and be provided with opportunities to enhance their understanding of effective teaching. In order to assist students to learn effectively teachers require a broad repertoire of skills and knowledge, including a deep understanding of content and how students learn and think.

What does the Research tell us?

There is general agreement that teachers' engagement in professional learning opportunities that are narrowly focused do not provide the necessary leverage to change their classroom practice, make a difference to the teaching and learning relationship and improve student outcomes. Teaching and learning is a complex process that requires more than short term, episodic skill training. Traditional one-off training workshops or in-services of short duration, unconnected to the needs of individual teachers and students and other professional development activities are viewed as having little impact on practice.

Effective Professional Learning

Teachers need to be provided with opportunities to learn; they must also be open to learning. A commitment to the professional growth of every teacher should be supported with professional learning opportunities that respect and acknowledge that teachers are adult learners who learn in different ways, come from different backgrounds, work in a variety of context specific settings and cater for the needs of diverse students. Effective professional learning recognises that teachers have individual needs, different motivations for learning, and prior knowledge and experience that will impact on the type of learning they choose to engage in. The design of learning activities must relate to, and make explicit the intended purpose and nature of what is to be achieved to ensure teachers understand the relevance and value these activities have to their classroom practice and student learning. The relationship between change in classroom practice and improvement in student learning demands recognition of what learning is required and how it will be learnt in the most effective way to achieve intended goals. The test of effective professional learning, as Little (1997) suggests, *"is whether teachers and other educators come to know more about their subjects, their students, and their practice, and to make informed use of what they know."*

Principles of Effective Professional Learning

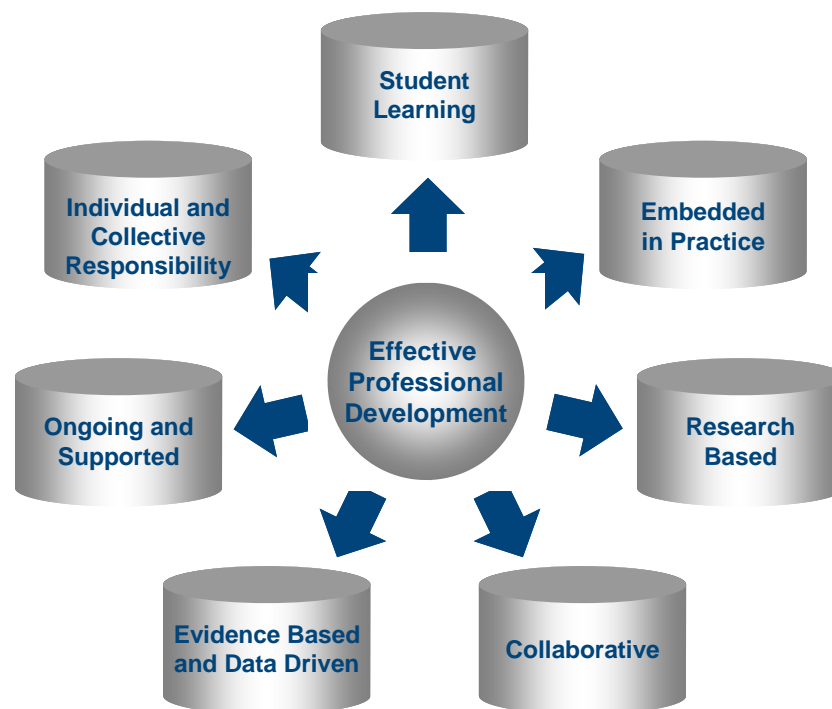
A draft set of principles of effective professional learning have been developed to inform the design of programs and learning opportunities for teachers and other educators. The provision of quality professional learning experiences is the essential link to improvement in teacher practice and student outcomes.

The Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning

These seven principles are designed to underpin the delivery of high quality professional learning to improve student outcomes and apply to all levels of the system – school, network, region and centre.

High quality professional learning models effective teaching and learning practices and should be:

- 1) focused on improving student outcomes (*not just individual teacher needs*).
- 2) focused on and embedded in teacher practice (*not disconnected from the school*).
- 3) informed by the best available research on effective learning and teaching (*not just limited to what they currently know*).
- 4) collaborative, involving reflection and feedback (*not just individual inquiry*).
- 5) evidence based and data driven to guide improvement and to measure impact (*not anecdotal*).
- 6) ongoing, supported and fully integrated into the culture and operations of the system – schools, networks, regions and the centre (*not episodic and fragmented*).
- 7) both an individual responsibility and a collective responsibility at all levels of the system (*not just the school level and not optional*).



REFERENCES

- Hawley and Valli. (1999) *The Essentials of Effective Professional Development*, in Darling- Hammond, L. & Sykes, G. (Eds) *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, Jossey- Bass,
- Hightower, A. (2002) *San Diego's Big Boom: District Bureaucracy Supports Culture of Learning*, CTP, University of Washington.
- Ingvarson, L. (2002) *Building A Learning Profession*, ACE Research Series.
- Warren Little, J. (1999) , *Organising Schools for Teacher Learning*, in Darling- Hammond, L. & Sykes, G. (Eds) *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, Jossey- Bass.

PD MODELS

1. New Mexico State Department of Education, *Guiding Principles for Professional Development*.
http://164.64.166.11/fedpro/downloads/titlell/ci_gfpd.pdf
2. Chicago Public Schools, *Professional Development Principles*, 2002
<http://www.pd.cps.k12.il.us/principles.pdf>
3. National Staff Development Council, *NSDC Standards for Staff Development*, 2001
<http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm>
4. National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT), *Principles of Effective Professional Development*, 2003
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/researchbrief/volume1/v1n15.html>
5. NW Regional Education Laboratory, *Principles of High Quality Professional Development*, 1997
<http://www.nwrel.org/request/june98/article5.html>
6. Johnson N. University of Melbourne, *Principles of Effective Professional Development*.(Unpublished)
7. The Knowledge Loom, *Principles of Practice for Successful Professional Development*.
<http://knowledgeloom.org/practices3.jsp?location=1&bpinterid=1034&spotlightid=1034&practicelisttype=1>
8. Quality Teaching, DEST, *Principles of Good Practice in PD*, 1999
http://qualityteaching.dest.gov.au/Content/Item_583.htm
9. The Mission and Principles of Professional Development
<http://www.ed.gov/G2K/bridge.html>
10. AFT Principles for Professional Development
<http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/PRINCIPLES.pdf>