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COMMENTARY

What Comes Next for Professional Learning in the Time of COVID-19

Addressing the Social and Emotional Work of Improvement



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We may never fully understand the depth, reach, and scope of California school districts' efforts to meet the urgent needs of students and families during this pandemic. Employees at all levels of the system across all departments are engaged in extraordinary work at breakneck speed on limited budgets. And the grim truth is that even with these collective, life-saving efforts, we will see a significant slide in students' learning, particularly for those students furthest from opportunity.

What's next?

A new academic year will begin without grades, without test scores, without reliable attendance data, and with incomplete grade-level content exposure from the previous year. Educators will face more demand for differentiation than before COVID-19 on a dramatically decreased budget; their students will have experienced differing learning opportunities with varying degrees of emotional safety and with unequal access to technology. In this context, educators' challenge to create effective learning experiences will soon loom much larger than this spring's technical challenges of offering digital tools and Wi-Fi access, yet these instructional hurdles won't be as readily visible. **How will systems support their educators' learning and improvement to address the complexity of this new context?**

To support teacher learning, system leaders need to push their attention beyond the traditional focus on structures and frameworks for professional learning; they need to apply cognitive science and adult learning research. **Now is the time to give attention to the social and emotional capacities and conditions that make adult learning and improvement possible**.

Improvement—for adults as well as for students—is an exercise in becoming self-aware about effectiveness. It is emotional work. In trusting environments, colleagues boost each other's ability to build self-awareness about the impact of their practice by helping to clarify each other's thinking; by shining a light on blind spots and biases; and by adding another perspective to their understanding about student learning.

An individual's ability to feel safe and whole inside of this collaborative, awareness-building exercise is key to a system's ability to improve. We propose that now more than ever—as teachers and administrators experiment with different approaches to distance learning and student support—educators need to cultivate the vulnerability and improvement mindset that will allow them, collectively, to answer the question: How do we know if our students are learning? This will require leaders at all levels to give their attention to nurturing the capacity for adults to learn and adapt in service of students' learning needs.

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE TO BEGIN THE PROCESS OF FOCUSING ON CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING?

Leaders create opportunities for educators to address the complexity of their work by supporting themindsets and practices that promote optimal learning conditions. To focus on conditions for learning, leaders would prioritize (a) centering teachers—and leaders themselves—on the student experience and (b) making sure the conditions for teachers and leaders to learn together are in place by continually returning to questions such as:

- What are our mechanisms for listening to our students and to our teachers? How are we using the data that we learn from them?
- To what degree does our staff feel a sense of belonging and safety such that they can surface honest uncertainties and share imperfect student work? To what degree is the conversation about students asset based?
- What degree is adult learning promoted and visible in our collaborative learning spaces—are colleagues able supportively to challenge each other's ideas and to help each other see what they cannot see on their own?

As schools and districts address the current health and economic crisis in addition to the widening of their students' opportunity gap, the most effective response will prioritize the system's ability to learn from the practitioners who are working most closely with students and their families. This requires a sincere interest in the experiences and knowledge of our frontline educators as well as a commitment to creating the conditions that make it possible for these educators to engage in meaningful learning together.

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