

Purpose

Supporting and reforming teacher and school leader professional learning is essential to the nation's efforts to drive equity and excellence for all young Australians¹ so that they can 'become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens'.²

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (the Charter)³ articulates the central importance of ongoing professional learning to achievement, development and progression against the National Professional Standards for Teachers and the National Professional Standard for Principals.⁴ It is based on compelling evidence that effective professional learning improves the capability, confidence and efficacy of teachers and school leaders which, in turn, has a direct impact on the quality of students' educational experiences and the outcomes of Australian school education.⁵

The Charter:

- > endorses the importance of learning in building the professional knowledge, skills, confidence and ability of all teachers and school leaders to achieve improvement in student participation, attainment and well-being
- > requires all teachers and school leaders to actively engage in professional learning throughout their careers
- > is a resource to inform and influence the planning, design and evaluation of policy makers and those who use, provide and fund professional learning.

Characteristics of effective professional learning

Effective professional learning is fundamental to achieving change and improvement on a scale that will make a difference to the attainment, well-being and participation of all Australian students.

Effective professional learning is aligned and integrated with broader school and system improvement strategies.

Effective professional learning is informed by evidence at each stage from conceptualisation, through design and implementation, to evaluation.

Effective professional learning is open to scrutiny and continuous review.

Researchers are unambiguous that professional learning which builds individual, team and system capability, improves the practice of teachers and school leaders and, consequently, makes a difference to student outcomes has the following interdependent characteristics. These should be considered when designing, selecting or reflecting on professional learning.

Relevant

To be effective professional learning must respond to the requirements of teachers and school leaders for knowledge and skills that improve their practice for the benefit of students. It should be driven by the needs of students, be meaningful within the school, sector and system context and connect with organisational goals and initiatives.⁶

Effective professional learning recognises that adults are more engaged in and apply their learning more readily, when it is relevant to their context and needs, when they have some influence and control over what, how, when and where they learn and when they can reflect and receive feedback on their learning.⁷

Relevant learning:

- > aligns with the needs of students
- > is timely
- > enables enquiry into, and solutions to be found to, real challenges
- > actively involves learners in design, content, practice and feedback
- > considers a range of factors including the experiences, strengths, career stage, and needs of the learner
- > recognises the impact of geographic, cultural and socio-economic contexts

Collaborative

Learning thrives in environments based on interaction and cooperation. The social dimension of professional learning builds collective responsibility, encourages the development of broader and deeper understandings and helps to sustain a culture of ongoing learning. It is an enabler of innovation.⁸

Where professional learning, application of new understandings, feedback and reflection occurs with others, learning has a much greater chance of resulting in real change.⁹

Collaborative learning:

- > occurs with others including experts
- > provides opportunities to make practice public, observe the practices of others, share ideas, apply new knowledge and skills in supportive environments, give and receive feedback on practice
- > offers challenge and support through coaching, mentoring and reflection
- > involves communication and cooperation among individuals and groups
- > develops professional learning communities

Futures focused

For professional learning to be effective and remain relevant it must build the confidence and skills of teachers and school leaders to respond to uncertainties and emerging challenges.

Globalisation and the accompanying environmental, social and economic pressures together with advances in digital technology have a significant impact on the availability, accessibility, content and delivery of professional learning and the people, tools and resources teachers and school leaders learn with and from.

A futures focused approach to professional learning recognises and embraces these changes.¹⁰

Futures focused learning:

- > concentrates on knowledge creation and the skills of the future
- > is actively directed at addressing the impact of globalisation, environmental, social and economic pressures and technology on students, learning and schooling
- > generates different responses to existing challenges
- > promotes the use of new knowledge, skills and technologies in classrooms and schools
- > uses technology to enrich and make professional learning, connection and communication with others possible anywhere at any time.
- > encourages and supports innovation and adaptability

Sustainable

Where there is evidence that professional learning makes a demonstrable difference to teacher and school leader practice, confidence and efficacy, student learning and system performance, it is much more likely to be sustained.¹¹

Learning cultures that are sustained involve teachers, leaders, teams and systems which model and nurture learning and create structures, provide time and find resources to support and evaluate learning.

Sustained learning

- > is usually conducted over time and is focused, persistent, well designed and resourced
- > is situated within a supported change process that values collaborative endeavour
- > uses evidence to inform decisions about the ongoing value and magnitude of the impact of initiatives and activities on student participation, attainment and well-being and system performance
- > is aligned with school, sector and system goals and reform initiatives

Professional learning activities and experiences that work

Professional learning encompasses all activities and experiences that support teachers and school leaders to improve practice, enhance confidence and increase efficacy, as well as those that challenge existing beliefs, attitudes and understandings.¹²

Professional learning activities may be formal or informal, in situ or external to a school or classroom, delivered by and with colleagues or recognised experts, online, face to face, and/or occur through conversation, observation, reading, reflecting or action-based research and inquiry.

Professional learning activities and experiences that work for teachers and school leaders for the benefit of students include but are not limited to:

On the job learning, such as:

- > coaching and mentoring
- > shadowing and observation
- > team learning
- > giving and receiving feedback
- > critical reflection and action
- > action-based research
- > collaborative analysis of student work

External activities, such as:

- > work placements
- > assessment and certification against professional standards
- > reading and responding
- > on-line learning
- > workshops, lectures and conferences
- > formal courses and higher degrees
- > sustained research
- > learning communities and networks

All listed activities and experiences have validity. Their relative importance and the size and strength of their impact on teacher and school leader practice and efficacy, student outcomes and system performance will depend on the quality and design of the activity, the learning purpose, context, learner needs and engagement and the level of support that is provided for the professional learning to be applied and sustained. To be successful and contribute to improving the performance of Australian students over time, all learning experiences must be relevant, collaborative, futures focused and sustained.

Evaluation is crucial

The ultimate test of teachers' and school leaders' professional learning is the impact this learning has on student outcomes.¹³

Evaluation for professional learning

Teachers and school leaders need to be expert at assessing students' learning, diagnosing individual student learning needs and designing interventions to move learning forward. The assessment of student learning needs in turn informs the identification and evaluation of the professional learning teachers and school leaders require to better respond to their students.

To do this, teachers and school leaders must have the skills to use data from a variety of sources to make accurate and confident judgments about the types of learning activities and experiences that will have greatest impact on their practice and on the achievements of their students.

Evaluation of professional learning

Those who engage in, fund, design and deliver professional learning all seek evidence about what is most efficient, provides greatest value for money and is most effective. To make informed decisions, they need to know what sort of professional learning enhances teacher and school leader practice, builds capability to improve student learning and, importantly, achieves these changes at scale.

Sophisticated, robust, multi-method ways of evaluating professional learning are required to identify the impact and effect size of professional learning.

Good evaluation practice incorporates national, system, sector, team and individual level review and analysis of professional learning and should include:¹⁴

- > conceptualising, designing and implementing evaluation strategies from the beginning of a professional learning activity or experience
- > clear, demonstrable aims and performance indicators as part of any plan for professional learning
- > a focus on the nature and quality of policies and processes to promote and support professional learning and the relationships between these policies, processes and impact measures
- > assessment of the impact of professional learning experiences on practitioner knowledge, understanding and practices
- > monitoring student outcomes and patterns of performance over the short, medium and longer term.

A compact for professional learning

The most effective teachers and school leaders are capable of constantly assessing and adapting their professional knowledge and practices and of positioning and repositioning themselves so that they are skilled, energised and able to motivate, teach and improve the learning of today's and tomorrow's students.

To improve the participation, attainment and well-being of every Australian student, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) calls on all Australian teachers and school leaders and those who determine policy and make decisions in schools, sector and systems to take responsibility for their own learning and to commit to building a purposeful, active and pervasive learning culture in every school and workplace.

Professional learning which builds capability and makes a difference for students will require a substantial and shared responsibility and commitment from all participants. Deliberate action is required.

- > Teachers and school leaders have a responsibility to become the best that they can be – to engage in, share and lead learning and create and apply new knowledge, understanding and skills for the benefit of students.
- > School leaders have an additional responsibility to establish the conditions and create an environment in which professional learning and achievement flourish and to nurture a community of learners that ensures everyone has the opportunity to grow within a workplace focused on excellent outcomes for all students.
- > Sector and system level personnel have a responsibility to ensure policies, procedures and practices value and contribute to systematic, well designed and sustained professional learning aligned to the common goal of coherent improvement and transformation in order that every Australian student experiences and benefits from the highest quality education.

Endnotes

- 1 Council of Australian Governments. (2008). *National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality*.
- 2 MCEETYA. (2008). *Melbourne Declaration*.
- 3 *The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* has been written in the same spirit as the *Charter for the Australian Teaching Profession* developed by Teaching Australia and republished by AITSL.
- 4 <http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/> and <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/national-professional-standard-for-principals.html>
- 5 Bolam & Weindling. (2006). *Synthesis of research and evaluation projects concerned with capacity-building through teachers' professional development*.
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- 6 Dumont, et al. (2010). *The Nature of Learning*.
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- 7 Barber, et al. (2010). *Capturing the leadership premium*.
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- 8 Cole. (unpublished). *Professional Learning that Works*.
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- 9 Fullan. (unpublished). *Learning is the Work*.
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- 10 Caldwell & Loader. (2010). *Our School Our Future*.
- 11 Timperley, et al. (2007). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*.
- 12 Cole. (unpublished). *Professional Learning that Works*.
Timperley, et al. (2007). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*.
- 13 Hattie. (2009). *Visible Learning*.
- 14 Guskey. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*.
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