

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (the PL Charter) describes the characteristics of a high quality professional learning culture and of effective professional learning. The Essential Guide to Professional Learning series unpacks the research behind key themes of the PL Charter.

This issue of the Essential Guide series expands on the critical role of school leaders in supporting adult learning and effective professional learning cultures.

The questions below are intended as a guide to assist you in making sure your school's professional learning has a clear purpose, a clear plan of action and adequate support for teachers.

You will know your professional learning culture is successful when:

- professional learning conversations are enabled by the common language and framework of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
- professional learning is matched to the experiences, strengths, current knowledge, career stage and goals of each adult learner
- professional learning links closely to school, sector and system goals and initiatives
- leaders engage in inquiry and knowledge building cycles and model progress in their own professional learning goals as identified in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals
- teachers and leaders engage in ongoing reflection about the impact of their professional learning and use this information to inform their professional learning choices in the future
- teachers are supported by their peers and leaders to be innovative in the classroom, try new strategies and evaluate their impact effectively
- professional learning is not a series of one-off events, but rather coordinated and planned learning opportunities that maximise impact.

Is the professional learning driven by clear and measurable goals for improvement?

How are the teachers involved in establishing the changes to be seen in:

- student outcomes
- teacher and/or school leader skills and knowledge
- teacher and/or school leader practices?

How are teachers made aware of the goals for improvement?

How are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers used in helping to set goals?

How is an effective culture of learning, and a collective responsibility for change, developed and maintained?

How are teachers and leaders involved in planning the process for delivery and evaluation of professional learning?

- Who decides what learning will take place?
- What professional learning is required for your whole staff and what is specifically planned to meet the needs of individual teachers?
- Who gathers the data to evaluate the impact of the learning?

What support is provided to teachers to inspire them to change and to give them feedback on their progress?

- How are teachers supported to try new initiatives in their classrooms?
- When do teachers receive feedback about their efforts to improve? Who provides the feedback?
- When do teachers work together on collaborative inquiry?
- How are teachers supported to share their expertise with others and to learn from others?
- How do leaders work to minimise the factors which distract teachers from their professional learning?
- How are teachers and leaders supported to be innovative and to try out potential new solutions to enhance student learning?



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When there is a learning-oriented culture with effective conditions, support and structures to enable adult professional learning, teachers and school leaders can learn and thrive together. The leadership activity found to have the greatest influence on student outcomes is leaders' promotion of, and participation in, teachers' professional learning and development (Timperley 2011).

The concept of the culture of 'learning organisations' is closely bound up with the idea of a continuous improvement process (Senge, Schon, Argyris). While these models have a longer history in the field of management, they have a home in the education sector in general and schools in particular.

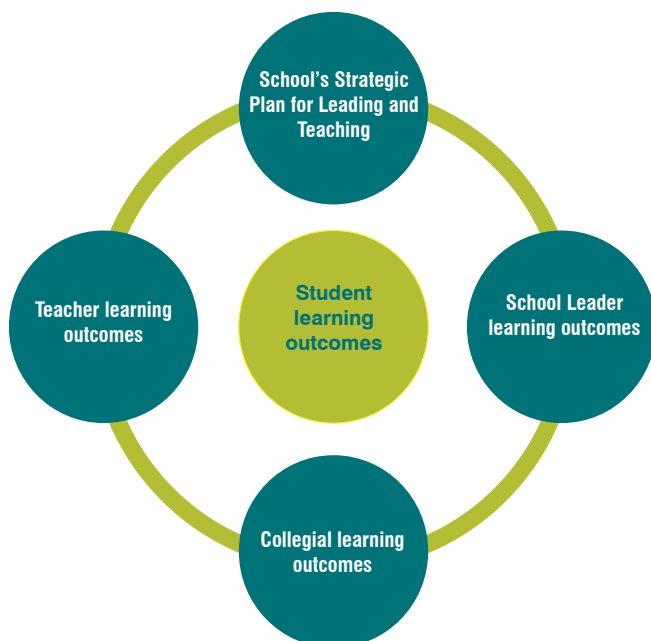
Here learning is prized, esteemed as the gift of a stimulating and challenging life, as well as being recognised as an essential tool for individual and collective evolution in a rapidly changing world.

Learning organisations challenge the traditional view of leadership as a command and control activity. This mirrors the change in the idea of teaching solely by didactic transmission. While leaders provide an essential guiding hand to the school, their role has become a framing and empowering one.

A holistic learning culture

Teachers and school leaders will be most engaged in their own learning and improved practice when they have the opportunity to select professional learning that is relevant to the needs of the individual, the organisation and the students.

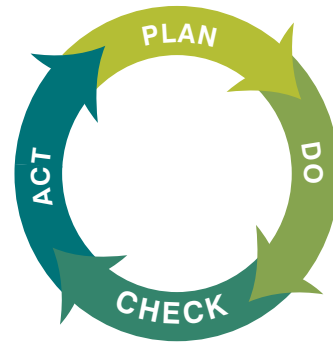
Sustained improvements in teacher and student learning are more likely to result if professionals actively learn with and from each other, in a constructive and rigorous way, framed by a shared educational philosophy and strategic plan for the school (Arnold and Flumerfelt, 2012).



Continuous learning

One of the key roles of the principal, described in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, is to "work with and through others to build a professional learning community that is focused on the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Through managing performance, effective continuing professional learning and regular feedback, they support all staff to achieve high standards and develop their leadership capacity."

This process is represented in the following diagram:



Changing culture and professional practices is not easy and requires sustained effort, and effective teacher and school leader support. The clear message of the PL Charter is that the results will be worth the effort.

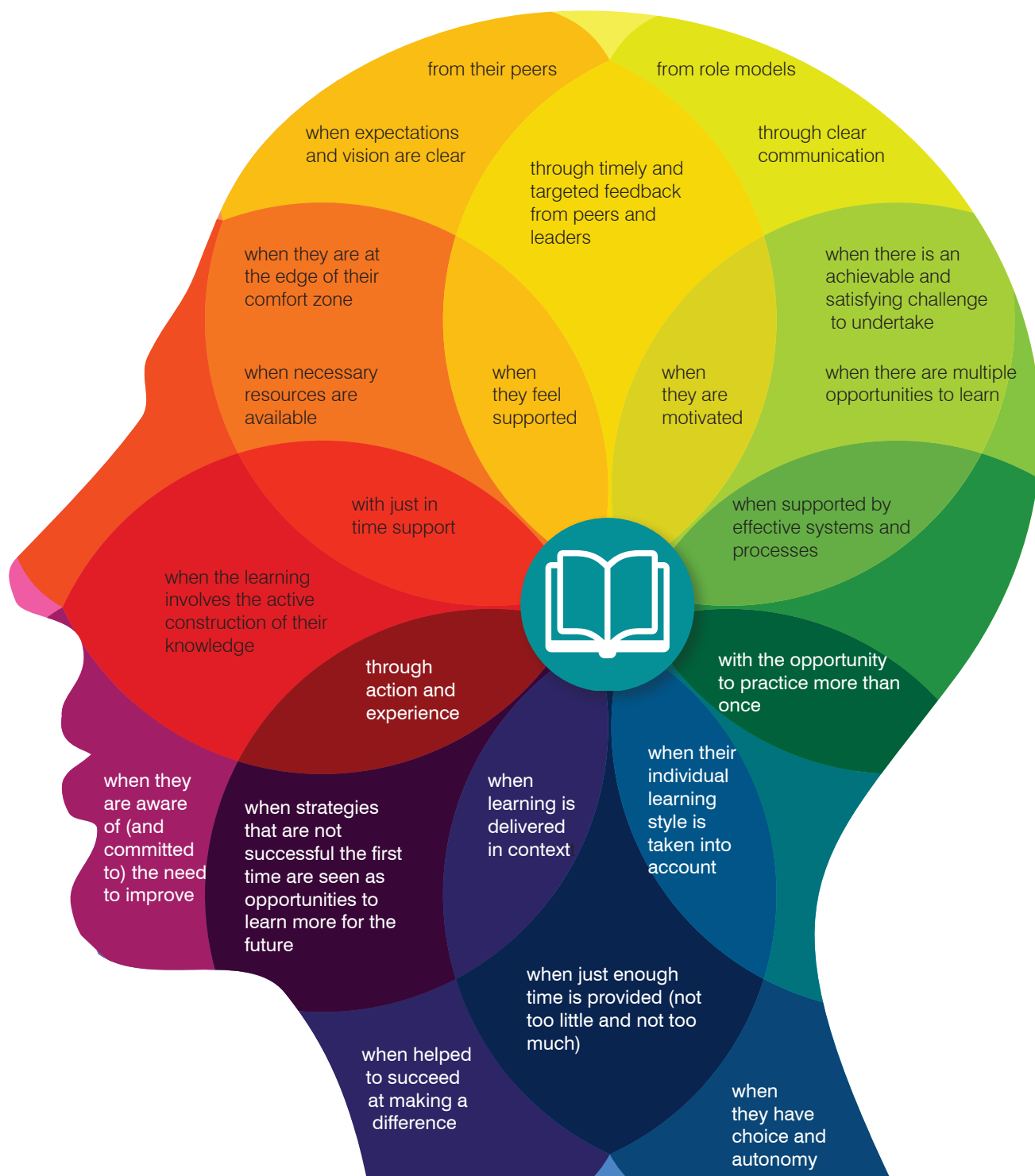
How do teachers prefer to learn?

A commitment to the professional growth of school leaders and teachers must be supported with professional learning opportunities that respect teachers as adult learners who have different learning styles, backgrounds, values and beliefs, and pre-knowledge, and who will need to apply their learning in a variety of different settings.

As the model above illustrates, integral to developing an understanding of new teaching or leadership practices is trying them out in practice, analysing what happened and problem-solving the issues that arise. Professionals need to be active participants in reflecting upon their current strengths and the overall vision of the organisation, identifying and activating areas for their own ongoing development, and then reflecting on the outcomes.

Leaders and teachers need to know why the understandings and practices promoted through professional learning opportunities are more effective than what they did before so that they can tailor new practices to meet the demands of particular situations (Timperley, 2011).

Adults learn best ...



Examples of effective strategies for facilitating learning



Leaders who support adult learning

- set strong vision and direction
- set an achievable number of ambitious goals
- focus on instructional leadership and developing teachers
- improve teaching and curriculum
- develop teachers into coaches of their peers
- promote and participate in teacher learning and development
- establish effective teams within the school staff
- distribute leadership among the school staff
- challenge problematic discourses
- make practice public
- understand, coach and develop people
- show respect for teachers as professionals
- focus on engaging teachers in the learning process
- focus on process as well as results, building motivation, ownership and increasing capacity
- provide sufficient time for extended opportunities to learn and using the time effectively
- ensure effective management systems and processes
- make effective use of human, financial and physical resources
- seek and make effective use of feedback
- make effective use of research and data and take calculated risks.

(supported by the Australian Professional Standard for Principals)



How do you support and encourage the learning of those around you?

Features of an effective professional learning culture



Leadership and a professional learning culture in action

Peter had taught in four different schools over the past 15 years, each with its own culture of learning.

The leaders in his current school placed teacher learning very high on their list of priorities and are involved actively in the professional learning. Peter had experienced this before, but what excited him was the way that everyone in this school worked together to identify where students could be more engaged or to improve their wellbeing and learning outcomes.

Nearly every decision was linked back to qualitative or quantitative data. Different sources of information were used to set goals for the future, and to identify how progress would be evident in the short and long term. With these clear expectations and a shared vision established, Peter felt confident to contribute to the whole school vision for improvement.

Peter hadn't seen the value of professional reviews, which seemed to him tokenistic and disconnected from his short or longer term goals for his own and his students' development. His view had altered now that his own learning goals were clearly aligned with the school's, and his aspirational goals were shared with colleagues. They were all now working towards a common purpose.

A major shared goal amongst Peter's group was identified: differentiating the way they gave feedback for each of the students in their classrooms.

Before undertaking any external courses to support their understanding and practice, Peter's team worked with the school leader to explore what they each knew about differentiation, feedback and working as a learning team.

With some assumptions and mental models worked through together, the team was then better able to select relevant learning opportunities that would meet their individual and shared needs.

It made a positive difference to Peter working in a team; he knew that someone would be checking in to see how he was going. He felt more supported to try out new ideas and when they worked, he could share his findings so that others also benefited from his investment. When his ideas didn't work, there were people to discuss this within a trusting setting, who would support his thinking about new approaches.

As the team worked together with a clear focus on improving student outcomes, Peter found that the conversations were positive and constructive. The structured, collegial conversations and reflections kept the focus on learning together, rather than on remedying deficiencies of practice. This approach to learning was professionally and personally enhancing and sustaining.

At the start of the year the school leaders checked in regularly to see how the team was going. Were further resources required? What were the team members' impressions of the effectiveness of the professional learning approach?

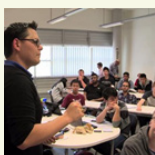
Once the team had consolidated their new skills in the provision of feedback, they were happy to welcome colleagues into their classrooms to share their learnings.

As time went on the team realised that the process they had developed including regular conversations, analysis of data, observations, and sharing of students' work could be applied to other areas of practice they were interested in exploring. Peter could see there would be many new opportunities for collegial learning of the kind they had just experienced.

Two further examples of strong cultures of learning organisations are available, along with others, on the AITSL website (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>).



The first is from Wooronna Park Primary School, in the suburb of Dandenong North in Victoria.



The second is from the Australian Mathematics and Science School, located in the grounds of Flinders University, South Australia.

In spite of their disparate nature and education mission, both schools showcase many of the features of a strong learning culture.

The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Leading Culture

Changing practice – the right drivers

We now know that teachers can be more effective in improving outcomes for students when they are active agents in analysing their own practice in light of professional standards, and their students' progress.

Leaders provide structures to support this reflection. A strong commitment to building trust and co-operation, as well as to the school's vision and mission, from both teachers and school leaders, is essential to the growth of the school as a learning organisation (Hargreaves, Halasz and Pont, 2007).

Leaders need to provide time for teachers to learn deeply, and employ inquiry based approaches (OECD 2011). This changes the role of the leader so that they are now helping teachers to find the right questions and to work together in the most productive ways.

Leading a culture of learning has become a high priority for school leaders but this is not a straightforward task (Newcomb, 2003). Achieving a balance between established practices and experimentation can be difficult, as can shifting concepts of top-down forms of traditional leadership.

Being involved in setting the direction, the methods that will be used to get there and to evaluate progress and success, enables teachers to contribute as the architects of change, not just as implementers.

The chances of successfully managing change in schools, improve through effective consultation, a willingness to compromise and, above all, through the involvement of teachers in the planning and implementation of change.

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