

# Enabling High Quality Professional Learning

A practical guide for leaders



The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has worked closely with key education stakeholders to develop the *Enabling High Quality Professional Learning: A practical guide for leaders* and the *High Quality Professional Learning cycle*. These resources outline the key stages in a cycle of High Quality Professional Learning and critical factors that enable it in schools<sup>1</sup>.

In developing these resources, AITSL consulted with national and international experts, state and territory education authorities, Catholic and Independent school authorities, and practising teachers and school leaders.

The Institute's responsibility to lead this work was endorsed by Education Ministers at the Education Council in April 2017.

AITSL acknowledges the work states and territories currently undertake to encourage High Quality Professional Learning. These supporting resources intend to complement and supplement existing processes across Australia, to ensure a nationally consistent approach to an ongoing and job-embedded professional learning culture in schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: In this guide, the term 'school' has been used throughout but it is always written with the intention of being inclusive of other settings including early childhood services and outdoor education and other non-school settings.

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## Who is this practical guide is for?

- Leaders determining the professional learning goals and needs of their school or learning context
- Professional learning coordinators considering the professional learning needs of their teaching teams

*AITSL acknowledges that professional learning is a two-way dialogic process involving both teachers and leaders in the ongoing learning cycle. This guide aims to support leaders to effectively work with teachers towards high quality professional learning.*

## What is the purpose of the practical guide?

The benefits of high quality professional learning are vast. When teachers engage in continuous professional growth, teacher quality improves, which in turn maximises the impact on learner outcomes (Naylor & Sayed 2014).

The purpose of the practical guide is to support leaders gaining a better understanding of the HQPL cycle and to encourage high quality professional learning. It aims to develop schools as learning communities and encourages purposeful conversations on the ongoing professional learning process.

This practical guide aims to assist leaders with improving the professional learning process within schools to capitalise on the benefits of high quality professional learning.

## How can the practical guide help me?

The practical guide provides information to guide and support teachers through all four stages of the HQPL cycle:

- Stage 1 - identify professional learning needs
- Stage 2 - select and undertake professional learning
- Stage 3 - apply the learning
- Stage 4 - evaluate impact

It includes an A3 pull-out that provides considerations for leadership support, implementation structures and processes at each stage.

## How do I use the practical guide?

- Read through the descriptions for each stage and use the questions to review existing professional learning processes in your school.
- Use the A3 pull-out as a reference for key support you can provide teachers through the cycle.
- Conduct whole-school discussions with teachers and encourage them to use the cycle as a guide for professional growth and to inform performance and development conversations.

This practical guide supports the [Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders](#) (the Charter) and [Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework](#) (the Framework).

## Leaders are key enablers for the High Quality Professional Learning of teachers

Leaders play an important role in enabling the high quality professional learning of teachers. The Charter emphasises the need for leaders to build a ***culture of learning*** with teachers that aims to improve learner outcomes.

The Charter (p.3) identifies six key characteristics of a HQPL culture. Strong leadership support is key and can be exhibited in a variety of ways with a focus on the core tenets of a HQPL culture.

A leader can support High Quality Professional Learning by...		
Encouraging ongoing learning and be actively involved	Encouraging a collective responsibility for learner outcomes	Establishing high levels of trust
Establishing structures and processes for HQPL	Encouraging purposeful collaboration through high levels of interaction and inter-dependence	Allocating adequate time and resources
Establishing a strong vision and direction for PL driven by data	Prioritising the most appropriate and effective types of professional learning together with teachers	Aligning the HQPL cycle with existing Performance and Development processes

## STAGE 1

# Identify professional learning need(s)

Effective professional learning starts with understanding teachers' learning needs, "at the individual, team or school level in response to an assessment of students' learning needs" (Tooley & Connally 2016, p.5).

Professional learning undertaken by teachers needs to be relevant and focussed on the problems of practice in their individual contexts. This will ensure a collective responsibility within schools to focus efforts on driving teacher professional learning towards improved learner outcomes.

Research demonstrates that supportive leaders create learning communities with a strong vision and shared values (Lomos et al 2011, p129; Vanblaere & Davos 2016, p34). The [Teacher Standards](#), the Australian Curriculum and school-based planning documents should guide a common understanding of the knowledge and skills that teachers need to maximise their impact on a child's learning.

## For this stage, consider the following questions

### Learning Goals

- What evidence is available to identify the learning needs of teachers?
- How are teachers involved in the decision making about their professional learning needs?
- How are school level strategic goals and initiatives discussed with, and communicated to all staff?

### Systems and Processes

- How are instructional leaders involved in the process of identifying the professional learning needs of teachers?
- How often are teachers engaged in performance and development conversations that encourage professional growth?
- What measures are in place to ensure adequate support and resources (e.g. time) have been allocated for high quality professional learning of teachers?

**Examples of data to support the identification of professional learning needs include:**

- ✓ student feedback
- ✓ peer/supervisor feedback
- ✓ parent feedback
- ✓ teacher self-assessment and reflection
- ✓ classroom observation reports
- ✓ lesson plans
- ✓ professional learning conversations and goals
- ✓ student data and work samples

**Supplementary  
Resources**

- [Leadership Scenarios: New Role, New Vision](#)
- [Leadership Scenarios: New Role, New Learning Culture](#)

## STAGE 2

# Select and undertake learning

Note – Stages 2 and 3 can occur concurrently for some forms of professional learning (e.g. Professional Learning Communities).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009, p. 5) suggest that an effective professional learning approach “is intensive and ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives and builds strong working relationships among teachers”. Of all approaches, school-based and practice-focused approaches are seen to be the most effective.

## For this stage, consider the following questions

### Learning Needs

- Have you considered different professional learning approaches (listed below) that best meet the professional learning needs of staff?
- How do the identified professional learning needs of staff, school initiatives and school improvement plan align with one another?
- How are teachers informed about different types of professional learning and guided to select appropriate ones?
- Are staff aligning professional learning needs with the Teacher Standards?

### Systems and Processes

- How can you leverage current expertise within the school to support each professional learning approach?
- What school structures and processes can be utilised for different professional learning approaches (listed below)?

## Professional Learning Approaches

There is a wide range of professional learning that a teacher can undertake (as below). Note that this list is not exhaustive.

These categories are non-discrete as there may be overlaps in learning approaches. For example, some *Professional Learning Communities* could involve learning journeys and observation of practice and feedback.

<b>Classroom-based teaching</b> Observation of practice and feedback Coaching and mentoring	<b>Research</b> Professional reading Inquiry/action research	<b>Communities of practice</b> Professional Learning Communities Networks Collaboration based on student work samples
<b>Face-to-face learning</b> Conferences School-based learning events Training courses and workshops	<b>Online Learning</b> Modules and courses Webinars Online forums	<b>Others</b> Learning Journeys Ad-hoc professional conversations

Many of these approaches can be job-embedded such as classroom-based teaching, communities of practice and inquiry research.

### Supplementary Resources

- [AITSL's Classroom Observation Strategies](#)

## STAGE 3

# Apply and refine learning

Note – Stages 3 and 4 can occur concurrently for some forms of professional learning (e.g. Action research).

Applying professional learning and evaluating and reflecting on the impact of a new approach on students, is key to achieving a change in teaching practice and learner outcomes (Naylor & Sayed 2014).

The school environment is vital to the transference of knowledge and learning into changed teaching practice. According to the Charter (p.3), teachers are well placed to apply their professional learning to classroom practice when there is “support for professional learning through school structures, explicit planning and the allocation of time”.

A culture of learning within schools supports the successful implementation of professional learning. Collaboration where teachers reflect on and refine their practice, then share their learnings, is a key element of this stage. Continual feedback from colleagues and relevant leaders is equally important.

## For this stage, consider the following questions

### Growth and Improvement

- How are teachers made aware of what effective practice should look like in the classroom?
- How are teachers supported to apply their learning in phases in order to experience gradual and incremental professional growth?
- How has the application of learning contributed to school improvement goals?

### Systems and Processes

- What school systems and processes are in place to support teachers to be innovative, try new strategies, refine them and reflect on their learning?
- What formal or informal opportunities are there for teachers to receive feedback, reflect and to challenge their thinking?

**Examples of how to support teachers to reflect on and refine the learning being applied include:**

- ✓ focusing on changing one or two practices at a time to support the transference of learning
- ✓ facilitating feedback from colleagues and school leaders
- ✓ encouraging reflective practice individually and with colleagues
- ✓ permission to fail
- ✓ sharing learnings with others

**Supplementary  
Resources**

- [Leadership Scenarios: New Role, New Conversations](#)

## STAGE 4

# Evaluate overall impact

It is important to evaluate the professional learning experience formatively, on three levels:

1. school support for professional learning
2. a teacher's learning and application of the acquired knowledge and skills
3. learner outcomes – whether the professional learning results in the intended change.

Measuring at multiple levels will assist in identifying areas for development and improvement at different stages of the HQPL cycle. This can guide future refinements to next steps and inform ongoing professional learning needs.

## For this stage, consider the following questions

### Goals and Outcomes

- What indicators have been selected to measure change in practice from the professional learning?
- Do you know which professional learning approaches had the greatest impact on teachers' and children's learning and the reason for it?
- How are staff being encouraged to review their professional learning experience and share it with their colleagues?

### Systems and Processes

- How are you tracking the types of professional learning approaches being undertaken by staff and the content of their professional learning?
- What school structures and processes need to be in place to better support teacher professional learning? How can these be evaluated to maximise support for teachers?

**Examples of data/evidence sources include:**

- ✓ learner data and feedback
- ✓ moderation of learner assessment tasks using work samples
- ✓ peer/supervisor feedback
- ✓ parent feedback
- ✓ teacher self-assessment and reflection
- ✓ classroom observation reports
- ✓ teacher perception through surveys etc.

**Supplementary  
Resources**

- [Leadership Scenarios: New Role, New Conversations](#)

# The evidence base

To assist in the development of this practical guide, AITSL examined Australian and international research on professional learning for teachers. Major supporting evidence includes:

Cole, P 2012, *Linking effective professional learning with effective teaching practice*. Melbourne: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.

Darling-Hammond, L, Wei, RC, Andree, A, Richardson, N, & Orphanos, S 2009, *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. National Staff Development Council: Dallas, TX. Retrieved 7 July 2017 from <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/nsdcstudy2009.pdf>.

Gulamhussein, A 2013, *Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*. Center for Public Education.

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Killion, J, & Kennedy, J 2012, *The sweet spot in professional learning*. 33:5, 10–17. Retrieved 9 December 2019 from <http://learningforward.org/docs/jsd-october-2012/killion335.pdf>.

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