



**Data-Informed
K-12 Human
Capital Strategies**

CONTENT GUIDE:

Educator Professional Learning

OCTOBER 2021

Educator Professional Learning comprises one piece of the educator human capital system portrayed here. Local education agency (LEA) and school leaders can use this guide to learn more about:

- The purposes and desired outcomes of educator professional learning;
- Effective practices that LEAs can use in planning and implementing impactful professional learning;
- Resources to support this work in your LEA;
- How to address likely challenges, constraints or other considerations when implementing educator professional learning; and
- Examples from other LEAs that have implemented strategies for professional learning.

Context

This guide is focused on professional learning for educators after initial mentoring and induction. After recruiting and placing a teacher in a school, educator professional learning is key to improving educator practice. Schools with strong educator professional learning systems retain more teachers by creating robust learning cultures, and they have higher student outcomes.

Professional learning activities typically fall under three types: **large group training sessions**, **small professional learning communities** (PLCs), and **coaching/mentoring**.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *How would you describe the attitude toward professional learning among leaders and educators in your LEA?*
- *When you think about professional learning, do you think of all three types of work, or are you focused primarily on training sessions?*
- *How explicitly does your LEA define the role of school leaders as developers of teachers?*

A strong educator professional learning system in a school uses all three kinds of experiences to help teachers learn and grow. These experiences can be built along a continuum, from individual experiences to group experiences — all of which should have specific connections to the classroom:

- **Large group training sessions**
- **Small Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**
- **Coaching by instructional directors or administrators**
- **Individual mentoring by peers**

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *Which of the four areas above do you think your LEA has the strongest structures for?*
- *Where do you want to focus your growth? Spend extra time on that portion of this guide.*

Training Sessions

Professional learning sessions, whether held for an hour after school or as part of a full day in-service, should be driven by key adult learning principles. These adult learning principles can be used to evaluate the likely effectiveness of professional learning opportunities, whether they are developed by an LEA, provided by a vendor the LEA hires, or accessed by individual educators.



*Given how often LEAs use external vendors to provide professional learning, leaders **can consider the elements of effective professional learning described here when selecting vendors.***

Commonly accepted adult learning principles include:¹

- **Adults have input into the content.** Adults know what they need. If educators participate in a session that they have asked for or know they need (based on data), they are likely to be more engaged.
- **Learning is based on adults' lived experiences and knowledge.** Adults need to be treated as holders of knowledge, not as blank slates. Their experience should be brought into the center of the room, rather than dismissed.
- **Learning has immediate relevance and impact.** Adults learn best when they feel like the learning is something that can apply to their work immediately and that it will help them solve a problem they are currently facing.
- **Learning is problem-centered.** Adult learning should be focused on solving problems, not memorizing content.

This next part of the guide goes through the steps in planning a successful session. The guide uses two different hypothetical professional learning session ideas to illustrate these steps.

1. Use data and input from teachers to decide where to focus—sessions take valuable time to plan and valuable time from teachers. Make sure the topics you are planning are the right ones for your team. Inform professional learning decisions using data on teacher effectiveness—as determined by the multiple measures in the PA educator effectiveness system, as well as any additional local measures. School and LEA leaders can also use informal feedback or formal survey data to identify areas in which educators want support. For more information on surveying stakeholders, see [this how-to guide](#).


¹ Knowles, M. (1984). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (3rd Ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing

	DATA DISCOVERED	TOPIC FOR THE SESSION
SCHOOL A	An elementary school’s math achievement has been stagnant across multiple grades. PVAAS data shows that students are falling behind. A root cause analysis—based on walkthroughs and conversations with teachers—indicates that flexible student grouping is not in use in most math lessons, and that this may be connected to the lack of improvement.	You decide to develop a session focused on flexible student grouping. This session may ask teachers to discuss and learn about approaches to grouping students and to determining what activities students should do in flexible groups.
SCHOOL B	An analysis of student data shows you that students in third to fifth grades are struggling with reading comprehension. You are a new leader and surprised because your K-2 teachers are very strong and have made sure students are reading by third grade. You have conversations and observe some classrooms and realize that, while your teachers have real skill in ensuring fluency, they have a limited bank of strategies for building deep comprehension of materials.	It’s time for a session focused on strategies for reading comprehension. This session may ask teachers to use work they are currently doing with students and to plan how to enhance that work with some of the strategies you will introduce in the session.

2. Session must address the intended need/purpose, and be practical, relevant, and result in a plan of action for implementation in the classroom. Teachers should leave a session more prepared to implement something specific, or with a plan for how to improve afterwards.

	STRONG OBJECTIVES	WEAK, OVERLY-BROAD OBJECTIVES
SCHOOL A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will learn specific approaches to assigning students to flexible groups and assigning math activities for these groups. Teachers will plan two lessons using these strategies that they can implement immediately. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will improve their math lesson-planning. Students will improve their math performance.
SCHOOL B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will be able to diagnose why students are struggling with comprehension in their classroom. Teachers will be able to implement three different comprehension strategies and will know how to choose the strategy based on student need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will improve comprehension of their students. Teachers will improve their teaching of reading.

3. Create or provide access to professional learning experiences that use meaningful activities that align with the adult learning principles. These experiences should include activities grounded in scenarios, real data, and practice. These activities should take into consideration culturally responsive practices and should build in next steps to ensure learning.

 Paul Bambrick-Santoyo lays out “Living the Learning Cycle.”² This cycle involves activities that allow participants to reach key ideas independently and then **sharing** to allow participants to come to conclusions. After the facilitators frame key theories and definitions, participants should engage in **application** of the learning and then **reflect** on their learning. With a clear action step to follow the learning, the professional learning session becomes both a part of teachers’ training as well as part of their job-based experience.

	STRONG PLAN	WEAK PLAN
SCHOOL A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers watch two math classroom videos—one with students primarily working in a whole group and the other with students in flexible groupings. Teachers discuss the difference between these two videos. Teachers look at two math unit plans that include different approaches to student grouping and predict which one will be more effective and why. The facilitator pulls these discussions into guidelines for planning flexible student grouping. Teachers look through a brief guide on flexible grouping assignments and develop two lesson plans for the coming weeks. Teachers spend a few minutes reflecting on their commitment to making these changes and what might hinder them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitator presents a set of ideas for how to employ flexible grouping in math class. Facilitator then walks through the process of planning a lesson with one of these ideas. Facilitator then works with the group to plan a lesson with another idea. Participants plan a lesson.
SCHOOL B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers read a difficult technical manual (scientific/ auto repair, etc.). They attempt to respond to questions. The facilitator guides them through the manual with a series of research-based comprehension strategies. Teachers reflect on the strategies and why they worked. Teachers then look at lesson plans or video clips of other strategies in action and reflect on why they worked. The facilitator pulls these reflections into learnings on reading comprehension. Teachers plan two lessons based on a set of strategies presented and then reflect on where their students are struggling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitator presents theory behind reading comprehension and asks participants to read an article about comprehension. Facilitator asks participants to summarize what they read. Facilitator then gives participants a set of reading comprehension strategies and shows them an example of one using a third-grade level reader. Facilitator offers assistance to teachers in planning future lessons.

² Bambrick-Santoyo, Paul (2012). *Leverage Learning: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Chapter 4.

4. Build in a structure to evaluate your professional learning activities. Evaluation need not to be complicated or time-consuming, but should help determine whether the time spent on the session was worthwhile. The Guskey model of professional learning evaluation asks us to consider:³


- **Participant reactions** (*did they like it*)
- **Participant learning** (*did they learn what you wanted them to learn*)
- **Ongoing support of the work** (*did the teachers have what they need to implement the strategy*)
- **Impact of practice** (*did they use it*)
- **Impact on student learning** (*did it improve student learning*)


The first two questions can be evaluated at the end of any professional learning session. The other three should be built into ongoing analysis of data at the school. For more detail on evaluation, see [this brief on evaluation of professional learning opportunities](#).


REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *As you consider your professional learning system, think about whether your district's sessions are aligned to adult learning principles.*
- *Consider developing a framework or a template for a professional learning plan and finding ways to evaluate your professional learning opportunities.*
- *Who do you think does this well in your district and how can you have them help build your structures?*
- *As you examine these options, consider the examples and resources below as support.*

³ Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

 **Leverage Leadership**, by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, provides clear examples of strong professional learning systems. LEAs can use the examples and templates in the book as a useful tool in building a framework and training.

 **Teacher Professional Development Evaluation Guide**: This resource from Learning Forward provides research and tools to help you evaluate your professional learning activities. For example, p. 23 has a checklist for planning how to evaluate professional learning, and a sample survey of teacher perceptions of professional learning begins on p. 66.

 **A review of the evidence on how professional learning affects student achievement**: This study by Regional Education Laboratory Southwest looks at 13 research studies on the link between professional learning and student achievement. This resource may provide support for district-wide efforts at sustained, intensive professional learning.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be a powerful tool for ongoing professional learning when they have clear purpose and structure. PLCs are most effective when they are used to provide opportunities for focused collaboration among teachers. These differ from a faculty meeting, for example, where administrative announcements and discussions may occur around important topics. PLCs are, instead, a forum where there is ongoing professional learning occurring through carefully planned and executed collaborative meetings among teachers.

Meaningful PLCs provide chances for a team of teachers to examine best practices, understand their current state, and build shared knowledge. Examples of meaningful PLC activities include:

- **Analysis of work products** (e.g., student work, lesson plans, and assessments) using a protocol that allows for feedback and norming
- **Book studies of a topic that is relevant to teachers' needs**, with a clear protocol that takes lessons from the book and applies them to challenges that the teachers are facing
- **Action-research projects** where the teachers have agreed to try a new strategy and are working together to analyze the effectiveness of the strategy
- **Data discussions** where teachers find trends in data and then develop solutions to challenges shown in the data

The strongest PLCs build a cycle of problem identification, solution development, and reflection.⁴ For more information on PLCs, see [this brief on PLCs and teacher leadership](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *As you consider how you strengthen professional learning communities in your district, include your principals and educator developers. They need to have strong skills in leading these communities: setting a purpose for them; participating in meetings to help make sure they stay productive; and helping teams to problem solve.*
- *Is a culture of professional collaboration already embedded in your district?*
 - *If not, starting professional learning communities will require more hands-on work from the leaders.*
 - *If the culture exists, but you need structure, then the leader may be able to point to resources and help build agendas—but then let the communities run on their own.*



Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work, by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos, has tools and resources to make sure that your professional learning community is not just a meeting by another name—but instead truly builds a culture of learning.

⁴ Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos. *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Solution Tree. 2010.

Coaching & Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring can target support directly to an individual teacher's needs. "Coaching" is not limited to those with the "instructional coach" title, but includes administrators, teacher leaders, and others whose roles may include individual instructional training and support. Strong coaching and strong mentoring can be an incredible force for instructional improvement,⁵ but weak coaching or mentoring can breed distrust and discomfort for a teacher.⁶

It is important, therefore, for coaches and mentors to reflect on conversations they had with teachers to ensure that they are truly meeting teachers where they are to improve skills. Coaching and mentoring allow for peer-based learning, and, when done well with specific actions to follow, also allow teachers to learn from meaningful job-embedded work. Furthermore, coaches and mentors should inform their work with student data (on learning, attendance, behavior, etc.) and data on teacher effectiveness.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *Are the roles of mentors and/or coaches clearly defined in your LEA?*
- *Are they trained?*
- *Given that coaching and mentoring can have such important impacts on a teacher's practice, think about how you want to position these individuals in your district.*

5 Kraft MA, Blazar D, Hogan D. [The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence](#). Review of Educational Research [Internet]. 2018;88 (4) :547-588.

6 The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, Learning Forward & Public Impact. (2016). Coaching for Impact: Six Pillars to Create Coaching Roles That Achieve Their Potential to Improve Teaching and Learning. Gainesville: University of Florida Lastinger Center; Oxford, OH: Learning Forward; and Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Accessed at www.learningforward.org/coaching-for-impact/.

Teacher Coaching

Before entering a coaching relationship, it is critical to understand teachers and their orientations towards learning. Below are two tools to help with this analysis:

1. Skill vs. Will: Situational leadership theory suggests that leaders may need to use different behaviors based on the skill and willingness to grow/enthusiasm of the people they are working with.⁷

	LOW SKILL	HIGH SKILL
HIGH WILL	Guide the teacher	Delegate ownership to the teacher
LOW WILL	Direct the teacher	Excite the teacher

- If the teacher has **high skill and high willingness to engage and improve**, then the leader needs to give this teacher responsibility to set goals and execute on ideas.
- If the teacher has **high skill but low willingness or improve**, then the leader may need to work to gain buy-in from the teacher by encouraging input and exciting the teacher.
- If the teacher has **low skill, but has high enthusiasm**, then the leader should guide them towards a plan and then support them along the way.
- If the teacher has **low skill and low willingness to engage**, the leader may need to provide specific instruction, direct next steps, and monitor progress.

These are not hard and fast boundaries, but this matrix provides a useful tool to begin to consider some of the different approaches leaders can take to a coaching or mentoring relationship.

⁷ Hersey, Paul & Blanchard, Ken. (1982). Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.



Strong coaching is not merely telling a teacher what to do. Strong coaching needs to follow adult learning principles: meet teachers where they are, assume they have knowledge to build from, and help them problem solve and come to conclusions on their own. To that end, coaching depends on several key elements:⁸

- **Build meaningful trust between the coach and teacher;** without trust that the coach believes in the teacher; that the coach has resources and ideas to help the teacher; and that the coach will really listen to the teacher; teachers will see a coaching session as a waste of time rather than a critical resource for improvement.
- **Data should drive the conversation and allow for joint decision-making between the teacher and coach.** Whether it is student data or data from an observation, solid evidence will allow the teacher to identify challenges, and then the coach and teacher can develop goals to solve these challenges.
- **A coach should approach the teacher with a curious, problem-solving stance and meaningful resources to back up their ideas.** If a coach comes at a teacher with a “my way or the highway” approach, the teacher will shut down. Further, the coach needs to have a significant toolbox of ideas to help find the one that fits the situation well.
- **Coaching should have a clear process and end with clear follow-up next steps.** Without that, coaching sessions can be quickly forgotten. A strong coaching session includes real time to plan on how to improve and maybe even practice redoing a piece of a lesson. Coaching should be seen as step-by-step rather than a comprehensive critique on all elements of teaching.

Individuals can approach coaching in a variety of ways. Three specific approaches to coaching are described below.⁹

1. Rapid Professional Growth: In this model, a coach does not give a teacher a long list of improvements. Instead, the coach finds small, bite-sized places to make changes. This model only works if coaching happens on a regular basis (every few weeks) rather than only once or twice a year. Choosing action steps is based on three questions:

- Is the action step directly connected to student learning?
- Does the action step address a root cause affecting student learning?
- Is the action step high leverage?

⁸ Finkelstein, Carla, “Thank You So Much for the Truth!” Phi Delta Kappan (April 2016, Vol. 97, #7, pp. 19-24); Bambrick-Santoyo (2012);

⁹ Marshall, Kim & David-Lang, Jenn. (2019). The Best of the Marshall Memo: Ideas and Action Steps to Energize Leadership, Teaching & Learning. Epigraph Books: New York. This book provides a summary of the below strategies for coaching.

Once the action step is selected, the coach assesses the teacher's progress in implementing the action step; provides narrow and specific feedback; and asks open-ended questions to help get to the core of the issue the coach and teacher are addressing. They then identify the next action step, practice addressing the step (even doing a role play), and then determine specific next steps.¹⁰

2. Facilitate reflection: In this model, the coach's role is to ask open-ended questions that prompt reflection and guide deeper thinking. The coach creates a safe learning space with empathy, and asks questions like *"How do you wish you'd responded?"* and *"What do you think affected how you responded to her?"*¹¹ This approach communicates trust in the teacher.

3. Outcome Map: This approach focuses on **six key questions** and helps the coach to think through the challenges the teacher might face in the work; envision the behavior that the coach would like to see; and provide supports.¹² The coach completes the map prior to the conversation but brings a blank map to the actual conversation. The six questions in the map are:

- What's the presenting problem?
- What's the tentative outcome?
- What would the outcome look and sound like in practice?
- What knowledge, skills or dispositions are needed to engage in the desired behaviors?
- What strategies might promote the specific outcome?
- What support does the coach need to provide to implement these strategies?

¹⁰ Bambrick-Santoyo, Paul. (2012). Chapter 2.

¹¹ Aguilar, Elena. (2017) "Improve Your Coaching With One Move: Stop Talking". Education Week, July 20, 2017.

¹² Abrams, Jennifer. (2011). "Planning Productive Talk." Educational Leadership, October 2011. Accessed at <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct11/vol69/num02/Planning-Productive-Talk.aspx>.

Mentoring Teachers

Mentoring requires some of the same skills as coaching: trust, clear follow up, and a focus on listening. However, mentoring comes as part of the induction of a novice teacher (or sometimes one who is new to the LEA). Mentoring is more based on the needs of the teacher and the focus of the conversation is on providing information or developing ideas. A mentor may not need as expansive a toolset but instead can focus on pointing the teacher in the right directions to discover the tools. Critical for a good mentoring relationship is a focus on both the personal and the professional, and real time to build the relationship. For more detailed guidance, see [the content guide on induction and mentoring](#).


Mentors take on three roles, with a focus on the first two:¹³


- 1. Information provider:** Mentors help early teachers with school logistics, provide guidance on how to handle a variety of situations, and help teachers become comfortable in their role.
- 2. Thought Partner:** Perhaps the most important role of the mentor, a thought partner gives the teacher someone to discuss ideas, ask questions, seek assistance with difficult situations, and develop skill through partnership-based conversations. A strong mentor will facilitate reflection in these conversations and will encourage a teacher to bring concerns to the mentor. They will work to help the teacher find her own solution rather than provide answers for her.
- 3. Skill Developer:** A mentoring relationship can turn into skill development. A mentor can provide specific ideas or development.


REFLECTION QUESTIONS:


- *What are the ways in which you currently prepare coaches and mentors?*
- *Do they have a framework or guidelines that they follow?*
- *As you work to build their skills, think about who you are hiring, how you are preparing them, and how you know if they are successful. Below are resources to help you do that:*

¹³ "Mentoring New Teachers." Southern Regional Education Board, Educator Effectiveness, January 2018. Accessed at https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/mentoring_new_teachers_2.pdf?1516727553.

 **Resources on a principal's coaching time:** *This Southern Regional Education Board article provides an overview of how one principal builds in real time for feedback, along with a sample coaching plan.*

 **The New Teacher Center** worked in Broward County Public Schools and Chicago Public Schools to implement a mentoring model. **This evaluation** describes the mentoring model and demonstrates that a strong mentoring program can have a positive impact on student achievement.

 **Leverage Leadership, by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo:** *This book provides a very specific strategy for coaching. This strategy could be adapted into a district-wide coaching technique.*

 **Summary of best practices and research in coaching:** *Neufeld, Barbara & Roper, Dana (2003). Coaching: A Strategy for Developing Instructional Capacity. Annenberg Institute & Aspen Institute. This paper provides an overview of best practices in coaching. It is a useful tool to build a coaching system in a school or district.*



CONTENT GUIDE:
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