

# Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION: EXCELLENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EVERY DAY

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## Learning team cycle of continuous improvement

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In education and in other professions, we read about improvement, learning, or change happening in a cycle. At its most fundamental, active learners, whether adults or children, observe the world around them, take action based on what they understand, and then reflect on what happened before they take their next actions, modifying strategies to better achieve the results they seek.

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning and definition of professional development put a cycle of continuous improvement at the heart of collaborative learning. We believe that a team learning cycle is the means for embedding professional learning in the day-to-day work of teachers, supporting them when they need it most.

The stages within the cycle may vary slightly according to the scope of responsibility of the team engaging in



the cycle. For example, a district professional learning committee may engage in the backmapping cycle to establish a year-long plan for the school system. The school improvement team may engage in one cycle for developing a year-long plan and another for examining a particular challenge at a deeper level.

The five stages we describe here guide the work of a learning team, most typically in a school, whose members share collective responsibility for the success of a group of students as well as each other.

### ENTERING THE CYCLE

How do learning teams know what student learning gap they're going to address during their time together? Ideally, they have the benefit

of working within a system or school that has crafted a shared vision for the success of all students or ensures that

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educators' work at all levels is aligned to an overall improvement plan. Alternatively, teams may craft their own vision for improvement and use it as a driver for their ongoing work and persistence. Depending on the context, educators may then dig into high-level data to determine broad areas requiring their attention.

Because the real world throws challenges at teachers from all directions, they'll likely be working on multiple improvement goals at once. The learning team has the important responsibility to identify which learning challenge, if addressed, will most benefit the students they serve collectively.

### STAGE BY STAGE

**Examine data:** Understand student and educator learning challenges.

In this stage, educators are focused on the critical questions: What do students need to know and be able to do, and what do the data indicate about our success in meeting these outcomes to date?

During this phase, team members study data to identify precisely what problem deserves their attention most. For example, while a team may be working in a context where their schoolwide goal is to increase reading comprehension, only through looking at student data will they know exactly which elements of reading comprehension are problematic, who is struggling, and who is succeeding.

Central to this work is establishing a culture where educators embrace the use of data. Educators also need knowledge and skills to use data effectively.

**Set goals:** Identify shared goals for student and educator learning.

During this stage, team members are focused on the question: What do students and educators need to learn in order for students to achieve desired outcomes? During the previous stage, teams were aware of the broad end goals. In this stage, their attention shifts to addressing the gaps that were identified as a result of their data analysis work. Team members are now ready to set specific student and educator learning goals. Many teams have found the SMART goal format (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, timebound) to be extremely helpful in creating goals whose outcomes can be easily monitored and reported.

After the team determines their student SMART goals, they are ready to determine what they need to know as educators to help their students be successful in achieving

the SMART goal. Educators consider the content expertise attached to the goal, the pedagogical competencies required by the goal, and any special needs of their particular group of students. The list of adult learning needs can be long. It will be up to the team to identify the most relevant needs to address to achieve their desired outcomes.

This stage ensures that educator learning is intentional and tied directly to what students need to learn.

**Learn individually and collaboratively:** Extend educators' knowledge of content, content-specific pedagogy, how students learn, and management of classroom environments.

In this stage of the process, learning teams are addressing the question: How will we engage in learning to achieve desired outcomes for both ourselves and our students? As they choose among many collaborative and individual learning possibilities, they will consider first and foremost what outcome they seek. They expect to have new knowledge and skills, and they expect to have an actionable plan for using it in the classroom with students and must seek learning that fits their expectations.

Team members also need to consider how to best differentiate their learning. While the team may have set collective goals to achieve, each team member has his or her own learning preferences, works in a particular career stage, and already has a unique level of content and pedagogical expertise tied to the goal.

With clarity around the specific learning needs and inclinations of each team member, the team can identify expertise and options for learning. There are many resources available to assist them in selecting the appropriate learning strategy. Among their options, they may seek information resources for study. They might turn not only to one another but to other colleagues in their district for expertise. They may ask an instructional coach in their building or district, perhaps even a coach on their team, for mini lessons on using particular strategies.

Teachers may need to turn elsewhere for expertise if they don't have the knowledge in the building or district, whether to an online network or a technical assistance provider with a specialty focus. Their learning may take many forms at this stage, and they engage as active participants throughout the process.

**Apply new learning:** Implement new lessons and strategies with local support at the work site.

At this stage, team members address the question: What will now change based on our learning? They take their learning into their classrooms. While they've had opportunities to practice with peers, teachers aren't apply-

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#### Learning Forward BELIEF

More students achieve when educators assume collective responsibility for student learning.

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ing their learning until they change what they do in the classroom in the presence of students.

Teachers will apply their new learning more than once — as they become more familiar with new strategies, they become smarter not only in implementing strategies and knowledge with fidelity but also through the feedback their coaches and peers offer. The first steps in the use of new strategies don't always immediately lead to the intended outcome. Even at the classroom level, teachers can experience the implementation dip, where new practices at first show a decline in results. Change, after all, takes time, and moving a body of learners forward isn't an instant outcome.

Teachers have support in taking their learning to this stage from coaches or peers. Perhaps they co-teach a lesson with a peer; perhaps a coach observes and supports the teacher before, during, and after with questions and suggestions. Perhaps they use video of their own teaching as a tool throughout the learning and application of new knowledge.

**Refine practice:** Use evidence to monitor and adjust implementation.

In this stage, teams ask the question: What is the impact of our learning? Once teachers take new practices into classrooms, they start to watch how their new knowledge and instructional strategies impact what happens in the classroom. They gather evidence of the implementation of their learning, and this evidence may take many forms.

Not only can they watch how students respond during class time, they also gather information from classroom assessments and student work. Based on the student learning goals they've set, teams develop formative and summative assessments that measure precisely what they hoped to achieve. They use the results to inform the learning steps they will take next.

Teams examine this evidence and consider whether new classroom strategies are helping them achieve their goals. With this information, they may realize they are on the right track and can refine what they do with students. They may also realize that their changes in practice aren't contributing to student learning, in which case they will adjust their plans. They'll need to consider several questions as they refine. Did they make the right assumptions when they set their own learning goals? Did they engage in appropriate learning that really helped them achieve their learning goals? Did they implement new strategies with fidelity and get sufficient support in applying their learning in the classroom?

When successful in achieving its initial goals, the team is ready to take on its next challenge. When results fall short, the team may return to a previous stage to dig deeper into the actions it must take to produce better outcomes for students.

## A word about learning teams

Learning teams function at many levels within schools, across a school system, in state or regional clusters, and virtually across time and space. Teams may form through the actions of their members, or they may form through mandate. Members may come together because of the grade level or the subject area they cover, or based on particular projects or job roles or titles. They may seek teammates to address common challenges or create innovative solutions. Team members may not have colleagues in their buildings or even districts who can collaborate around their specific needs and thus may need to find peers in other ways, perhaps virtually or through periodic face-to-face gatherings.

Thus, we recognize that not every learning team has a scheduled time and place to meet together each week and may need to adapt the suggestions and actions we offer.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Many schools and systems understand that learning teams or professional learning communities are a valuable structure for ensuring that educators have time to learn in collaboration with colleagues. Some districts establish team time with a clear vision for exactly what the learning teams will do, including how they will use their time together and what results they are expected to achieve. Other districts have been convinced that PLCs would be great, so they create schedules that allow teams to meet, yet they don't have a plan or vision for what those teams will do during that time. They trust that the professionals will know what to do with the time.

Setting aside team time without a plan is a professional hazard. Districts can go to a lot of trouble to rearrange schedules, at the risk of upsetting parents and expending considerable energy with teachers and unions. If that time isn't well spent, everyone involved will label team learning a waste and professional development gets another black mark. The cycle of continuous improvement is the plan for using that time in ways that lead to changes in practice and student results.

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