Professional Learning

All teachers have a right to be supported in their professional learning, as well as a responsibility to be involved in performance and development processes that facilitate their professional growth and the provision of quality teaching and learning, consistent with the NSW Department of Education and Communities policies, aims and strategic directions and school plan.

(Performance and Development Framework, p1.)

Why is professional learning important?

Research confirms that purposeful, well-resourced, high quality professional learning for teachers and school leaders is one of the most effective strategies for improving student outcomes in our schools.

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders describes effective professional learning as a shared responsibility that must be taken up at all levels of the education system by teachers, school leaders, system leaders and policy makers.

The Performance and Development Framework for Principals, Executives and Teachers in NSW Public Schools states that well-resourced and timely professional learning that meets the needs of teachers, is an integral condition of a skilled, effective and professional teaching workforce.

What are some examples of professional learning opportunities?

Professional learning includes a teacher’s participation in a workshop, conference, seminar, course or the completion of on-line learning activities. Professional learning also is drawn from the processes and practices of teachers in the normal course of their work at school.

Where professional learning is directly related to the work of teachers and provides opportunities for collegial enquiry, support, feedback and reflection in the school setting, it can maximise teachers’ capacity to enhance teaching practice and lead to improved student outcomes.

Effective professional learning opportunities can include:

- Peer observations
- Lesson study
- Online forums
- Action research
- Moderating student work
- Learning communities
- Structured discussions
- Teachers as co-researchers.

What are the characteristics of effective professional learning?

Professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused, and when it supports teachers to reflect on, question and explicitly work towards enhancing their practice and achieving professional goals.
Relevant

- embedded in or directly related to the work of teachers
- based on identified needs of students
- linked to system and school priorities
- aimed at encouraging teachers and school leaders to find new solutions to persistent issues by challenging their assumptions about their practice
- matched to the experiences, strengths, current knowledge, career stage and goals of the teacher.

Collaborative

- focused on teachers working in classrooms with other teachers and connecting to teachers and leaders within and across settings
- promotes teacher and leader ownership of their learning through active involvement in the design, content, practice and evaluation of their learning
- provides opportunities to receive feedback on practice, and observe the practice of others
- offers support to change practice through coaching, mentoring and reflection
- provides opportunities to access and learn from experts
- develops professional learning communities within and between schools
- uses technology to enrich collaboration and learning.

Future focused

- promotes action research and enquiry and develops teachers as researchers
- develops high level skills that allow teachers and school leaders to adapt and excel in a rapidly changing and hyper-connected world
- supports teachers and school leaders to explore research that challenges their thinking
- encourages teachers to develop their own theories of practice and promotes use of a range of effective pedagogical practices
- promotes innovation.

Principles of high quality professional learning

- embeds professional learning in daily practice
- explicitly connects to the work of teachers within the context of their school and classroom – early career teachers, experienced teachers, expert teachers, mentors and supervisors working together to share, critique and improve their practice
- explicitly connects teacher learning with student learning outcomes
- deepens content and pedagogical knowledge through research, practice and critical reflection
- builds collaborative relationships between teachers, mentors and supervisors by facilitating positive, supportive, collegial discussions and practice
- distributes leadership – repositioning teachers as leaders of professional learning
- is intellectually rigorous and standards-based.

How can professional learning be evaluated?

As part of the annual performance and development cycle, teachers should receive regular feedback, collect evidence and engage in ongoing reflection to adjust their Performance and Development Plan (PDP). Part of this process is the ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the professional learning activities undertaken by teachers. Evaluation of professional learning should take into account the extent to which an activity has:

- assisted progress towards achievement of the teacher’s professional goal/s
- enhanced teaching practice to more effectively address students’ needs
- promoted collegial practice to build on existing learning
- addressed current challenges and/or future planning.

Further reading

DEC
Classroom Teacher Program: Quality professional learning

AITSIL
Professional learning support
http://www.aitsl.edu.au/professional-growth/support/professional-learning-support
Designing professional learning
http://www.aitsl.edu.au/professional-growth/research/designing-professional-learning
http://www.toolkit.aitsl.edu.au/category/professional-learning