

Teacher development in high-performing systems

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Stories of children falling behind in our schools are well known. There are problems at both ends of the spectrum: the number of high-performing students is shrinking at an alarming rate, while growing up in a low-income community leads to worryingly low learning outcomes. Our response to these problems is the same as the rest of the world: improve teaching to increase kids' learning.

It is the right objective, but while there are pockets of success, most schools have not improved. Too many teachers feel under-prepared in classrooms, and the millions of dollars we invest in teacher professional development is too often viewed as a waste of time. This isn't because of incompetence or a lack of effort. It is incredibly difficult to improve teaching and learning across tens of thousands of classrooms. Few school systems succeed in making the transition. But for those that do, the benefits to children are immense, and the working lives of teachers improve dramatically.

A new report by Learning First — "*Beyond PD: Teacher professional learning in high-performing systems*" — examines professional learning in four high-performing systems: British Columbia, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Beyond PD shows how we can significantly improve children's learning by developing and implementing effective teacher development and professional learning programs.

Too often, a typical Australian teacher reaches the end of the year exhausted. She is enthusiastic about educating children, but she often feels overwhelmed by the complexity of the job. She sits in her office knowing she has had success with many of her students but she wishes for more success for them and feels a bit disappointed with her opportunities to develop her professional expertise. She has technically clocked in a lot of "PD hours" going to seminars and workshops, but she remembers many of them as being boring and not relevant to issues she was facing in her classroom. She only received feedback from a classroom observation once, and she never got the chance to view other teachers' classes. It is so hard for her to improve her teaching — to help the kids she is having trouble reaching — when no one looks at what she does and tells her how to improve. She was assigned a mentor in her school, and although the mentor was helpful for administrative questions, she didn't receive much advice based on someone having watched her teach.

Meanwhile, a new teacher in Shanghai is nervous as she prepares to face her class of 45 students for the first time but she knows she can expect great support. She has two mentors: one provides subject-specific guidance, the other general pedagogical advice. Her mentors know that they will not be promoted unless they help her improve. They observe her classroom teaching on a regular basis, and she observes her mentors' classes to learn and work on those aspects of her teaching that are most critical to her students. In between classes, she regularly attends research groups with other teachers to analyse specific teaching and learning issues in their classrooms. None of this is easy, but it is all focused on what her students most need.

For teachers in high-performing systems, like Shanghai's, professional learning is central to their jobs. It is not something left to Friday afternoons or a few days at the end of the year.

Teacher professional learning is how educators improve student learning; it is how they improve schools; and it is how they are evaluated in their jobs. They work in systems that are organised around improvement strategies explicitly anchored in teacher professional learning. Not surprisingly, their students continually rank as the best performing in the world.

Australian school education has also been focusing on teacher development but the strategy is not working as well as we would like.

The Beyond PD report examines teacher professional learning in four high-performing systems. On international tests, students from these systems are often many months or even years ahead of Australian students in the same year level. There is no single reason for their success, but leaders in these systems have emphasised their reforms to teacher professional learning and development.

Some are city-states, some have vast regional areas, and they all have unique histories and cultures. But all have a similar strategy ensuring that professional learning is effective, collaborative and built into the daily lives of teachers and school leaders. And most importantly, all reform efforts are anchored in improving student learning.

What are the lessons for refining our improvement strategies in Australia?

First, ensure that teacher professional learning is focused on an improvement cycle that begins and ends with student learning. The topic of teacher professional development is determined by the learning needs of students in a classroom. Professional development is not considered to be effective unless it actually improves student learning.

Second, develop a strategy that extends well beyond traditional professional development policies. This requires increasing accountability for the quality of teaching and the development of teachers. It requires the creation of new leadership positions to develop teachers and improve professional learning. These new leaders must be specifically trained in how to continually improve teachers and teaching. And it requires the targeting of school resourcing to make sure teachers have enough time to focus on professional learning.

To help Australian educators, Learning First has collected the detail from high-performing school systems — sample policies, job descriptions for professional learning leaders, development rubrics and evaluation forms — and will make this material freely available to all Australian schools.

Professional learning should begin with an assessment of student learning needs, be tailored to meeting those needs, and be evaluated to see if it improves student outcomes. It must function on an effective cycle of improvement.

First, teachers assess students to identify their learning needs. Teachers in a primary school may look at the data and realise they have a problem in Grade 3 maths. They deeply analyse student learning in this area (mainly through assessment) to better diagnose where students are — and are not — learning.

Second, they develop the teaching practices that meet the student learning needs identified in stage 1. So, after diagnosing the key areas for improvement, these teachers then draw on experts and look at the evidence on how to improve instruction. They pick the most effective strategies and try them in their school.

And finally, they evaluate the impact of these new practices on student learning, refining practice along the way. As these teachers and school leaders try new methods of teaching, they evaluate whether teaching is improving and how students are affected. Teachers and

school leaders observe each other's lessons and provide feedback on how to improve teaching and learning.

If the new practices are working, teachers share what they have learned throughout the school. If they are not, then teachers analyse why and further refine instruction.

The improvement cycle is not new, and many schools in Australia are trying various forms of it. It fails when it is used in isolation. To make it effective — to truly get the improvements in teaching and learning we have been looking for — requires that teacher professional learning and development be placed at the centre of a system-wide strategy.

To transform the way people work every day — in every classroom in every school — requires strong leadership with specific skills in how people and organisations can change and move away from their usual practice. High-performing systems have developed new leadership positions to do this. These new leaders are regularly trained alongside school principals, so each school has multiple leaders acting to change the way people work to ensure that teachers' individual and collective professional learning is meeting school objectives.

Importantly, the new leaders are teachers; they are peer leaders, chosen from the teaching force to lead professional learning in each school. They often remain in the classroom on a part-time basis. Part of the reason they are effective is that other teachers are more like to change the way they work when they see colleagues — not just official leaders — role-modelling effective practices.

At a system level, select groups of "Master Teachers" in Shanghai and Singapore develop professional learning in their subject area. The "Principal Master Teacher" in English language in Singapore is the pre-eminent English language teacher in the system. She sets the standard for pedagogical expertise and leads the network that develops English language teachers.

Every other profession has a level of master practitioner. Too often, policymakers are told they have to choose between a strategy emphasising accountability or development. This is a false dichotomy: it reflects an outdated interpretation of both development and accountability.

In high-performing systems, accountability is critical to the success of professional learning in schools. This is because accountability focuses not only on student performance, but also on the quality of instruction and professional learning. Accountability for the quality of professional learning can lead to significant changes. Teachers in Shanghai will not be promoted unless they can demonstrate that they are collaborative. Similarly, mentors will not be promoted unless the teachers they mentor improve. School principals in British Columbia must prove that they are following an improvement cycle and that it is improving results.

If professional learning programs in Shanghai schools are considered to be of low quality, then the central office will take over much of the school's professional learning. All of these measures send clear signals that professional learning is important. It is clear to everyone that this is how we improve kids' learning.

A common problem preventing the development of effective professional learning in many systems is a lack of time. Shanghai provides the clearest example of a system that commits a large amount of time to teacher professional learning. They focus on the quality rather than the quantity of teaching. The average teacher in Shanghai teaches for only 12-14 hours per week. Considerable time is allocated to professional learning. But Shanghai is an outlier

even among high-performing systems. For example, British Columbia made huge gains with only one to two periods per week allocated to formal professional learning.

Many schools can make more time with current resources by eliminating excess teacher duties, making small changes in schedules, and by refining existing professional development. Additional funding is often needed in poorer schools. But regardless of the amount of money spent, real improvements only come with changes in the way people work in schools; with changes in school culture and collaborative development.

Reform in Australia should come from the states and leaders of the Catholic and independent sectors. There is little the federal government can do as schools are run by the states and independent sectors.

The creation of effective professional learning does not require a complete overhaul of education policy. Progress in high-performing systems came through incremental improvements. For example, Singapore did not implement all of its reforms in one go: it changed one aspect at a time over many years, pragmatically trying what worked and discarding what did not work.

This offers a road map for reform in Australia: namely, to emphasise an improvement cycle as the key to school improvement and to build the leadership, capacity, and accountability for the quality of the improvement cycle in schools.

Over time, this will transform the improvement cycle into a culture of continuous professional learning that turns schools into true learning organisations. When this occurs we will get the improvements in student learning that we all hope for.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/learning-first-master-teachers-needed-to-improve-education/news-story/eaee51733ef22740418f043c367b27de>