

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Professional learning and development is at the heart of an effective and continuously growing teaching profession – Fullan and Hargreaves (2016)

OVERVIEW

This professional practice note emphasises the value of effective professional learning for establishing a high performance learning culture and supporting strong student learning outcomes.

This note contains guidance for selecting and realising professional learning opportunities, including understanding the impact of professional learning.

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Effective professional learning is collaborative, inquiry focused and embedded in teaching practice. It is guided by the needs of the students and reflects the broader school strategic direction (articulated in the school's Annual Implementation Plan).

Professional learning is most effective when it is identified collaboratively by school leaders and teachers as they reflect on how their work contributes to the school's improvement goals.

THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Effective professional learning leads to improved teacher knowledge, skills and practice. It has the power to shift attitudes, behaviours, relationships and every day interactions.

Effective professional learning empowers teachers to pursue a moral purpose of helping students to thrive. It serves as a catalyst for student learning growth because students taught by the most effective teachers learn in six months what other students may learn in a year.

The effectiveness of professional learning should ultimately be judged by its impact on student outcomes.¹

For more information, see: [Evaluate the impact of your teaching](#)

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

Professional learning choices should be shaped by the learning needs of students. In this way, effective professional learning builds on teacher competencies and responds to teachers' individual learning needs in the context of their school. The diagnostic tools available through the [Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning](#) can help with identifying these needs.

Student learning outcomes and other data sets can be used to identify professional learning needs and evaluate professional learning impact.

For more information on data literacy, see: [Professional practice note 5: Using data walls to turn data into instruction](#).

Teachers and school leaders can utilise Performance and Development Plans (PDPs) (guided by the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) Improvement Cycle) to understand and identify learning needs, trial and innovate, and work towards practice excellence.

VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Does the learning meet our school's needs?

Determine how effective a professional learning opportunity will be with the following checklist:

- The professional learning directly enables the application of learning to classroom practice to improve student learning outcomes.
- The professional learning helps with assessing the impact of teaching practice on student learning.
- The professional learning supports or fosters a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.
- Participants can apply and refine their new knowledge in their own school.
- The professional learning draws on current research on effective teaching and learning.

¹ Cole, P. 2012. *Linking effective professional learning with effective teaching practice*. Melbourne: AITSL

- The professional learning is co-designed with the school to meet their student learning needs.
- The professional learning design and delivery is based on the principles of adult learning.
- The professional learning aligns with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's (AITSL's) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.
- The facilitator/coach/expert is engaging and knowledgeable. They take teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs and practices into account when delivering the training.
- The professional learning is compliant with Australian and Victorian regulations (e.g. data legislation, Working with Children Checks).

Guided by the Standards

The AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers provide a continuum of professional knowledge, practice and engagement. These standards can also be used to determine appropriate professional learning.

See: [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers](#).

LEADING TEACHER LEARNING

To enable effective professional learning, and to foster collaborative opportunities to build new teacher knowledge, planning and sound leadership are required. There are several key principles underpinning effective leadership of teacher professional learning.

For more information, see: [Leading teacher learning](#).

A HIGH PERFORMANCE LEARNING CULTURE

In high performance learning cultures, teachers are inquisitive, increasingly knowledgeable and well informed about becoming better practitioners together.²

Many schools have already established approaches to professional learning to develop teaching practice, including through the whole-school Professional Learning and Development Plan.

When a school culture is one of 'collaborative professionalism', teachers become investigators of their own practice and work together to find evidence-based solutions to problems of practice.

Several key initiatives have been established to support a professional learning culture. These include:

Professional Learning Communities

The Victorian Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) initiative is founded on the idea that students learn more when their teachers work together. Participating schools benefit from a highly-regarded program of professional learning and ongoing support from regionally based teams, including a dedicated PLC regional manager who can advise, coach and train school leaders and teachers.

For more information, see: [Professional Learning Communities](#).

Professional practice days

As part of the Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2017, each teacher is entitled to one day per term (four days per year) release from their scheduled duties, including teaching, to focus on the improved delivery of high quality teaching and learning. These days are in addition to existing pupil free days and pro-rata for a teacher employed part-time. The work undertaken on these days will be consistent with departmental and school priorities and selected from the following areas: planning, preparation, assessment of student learning, collaboration, curriculum development, relevant professional development and peer observation including feedback and reflection.

For more information, see: [Professional practice note 1: Four professional practice days](#).

Learning specialists

The introduction of the learning specialist classification from the 2018 school year also presents an opportunity for leaders to target their professional learning. Learning specialists play a supportive role by:

- teaching demonstration lessons
- observing and providing feedback to other teachers
- facilitating school-wide professional learning.³

For more information, see: [Professional practice note 2: Learning specialists](#).

² Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. 2012, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. Teachers College Press, New York & Toronto, pp. 127

³ For more information, see Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2017 Schedule 2

CASE STUDIES

PRIMARY MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE SPECIALISTS FACILITATE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

At a medium-sized regional primary school, professional learning is facilitated by teachers trained through the Department's Primary Mathematics and Science Specialist Initiative and an expert from the University of Melbourne.

After looking at their student learning growth data, the school leadership team decided to focus on improving numeracy outcomes. The school's ambition was to embed enhanced instructional practice in relation to mathematics and to move away from drills.

The school leadership team reviewed their capabilities and first engaged an expert to support teachers to undertake evidence-informed professional learning.

Primary Mathematics and Science Specialists then facilitated team discussions regarding:

- teachers' understanding of the content and how best to deliver it
- students' current level of skills and knowledge as illustrated by the student data
- instructional strategies and practice.

For teachers, scheduled time for reflection allowed both recognition of successes and the ability to acknowledge what was not effective. This enabled teachers to explore and direct their own development.

The school leadership team used peer observation to support teachers to embed their learning in practice and monitored the shift in thinking and practice through teachers' planning and assessment documents.

SPECIALIST SCHOOL BUILDS TEACHING PRACTICE

A metropolitan specialist school used its participation in the Victorian Professional Learning Communities initiative to build teaching practice.

School leaders identified the initiative as a way to improve data literacy among staff. Developing data literacy capability amongst staff led to some realisations about the teaching and learning program across the school. The data showed school

leaders that there was inconsistent content knowledge among teachers and varied approaches to collecting and analysing student data.

Teaching to agreed curriculum content and collecting student data through participation in the PLC initiative has led to changes in the way the school operates.

One instructional leader believes that the introduction of collaborative practices through this professional learning community has benefited staff greatly. The instructional leader and the principal agree that the creation of new structures and processes have encouraged teachers to learn more about the content they teach, about pedagogy, and about what is happening in the classroom.

Teachers now have more confidence in their data literacy and have developed greater capacity to analyse their own work as they present it to other PLC members for discussion and collaboration.

RESOURCES

This note is part of a series of professional practice notes to support school-based staff to continue improving their practice. Other resources available include:

- [Professional Practice Elements](#)
- [Victorian Teaching and Learning Model](#)
- [Literacy and numeracy strategy](#)
- [Victorian Literacy Portal](#)
- [Literacy Teaching Toolkit](#)
- [Victorian Numeracy Portal](#)
- [Mathematics Curriculum Companion](#)

CONTACT

For more information, or to share your feedback, please email: professional.practice@edumail.vic.gov.au