

18,000

Reasons to Rethink
Professional
Development



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Introduction

To borrow from Dickens, it's the best of times and the worst of times to be involved in educator professional learning.

We all — educators, building and district leaders, coaches and mentors — engage in professional learning because we believe it's crucial to our students' success. We are advocates to influence policy and bring increased focus and resources to this arena. With a framework from the pioneering work of Guskey¹ and Killion,² we look at what visionary school systems have learned, use technology effectively, budget enough time to do the work and implement a protocol to guide us in our thinking.

We work hard to refine effective methods for measuring the impact of professional learning on educator practice and student learning. This can be daunting, yet it's a fascinating and increasingly important endeavor.

At the same time, we're bombarded with high profile reports. The press churns out findings that are discouraging. Professional learning is under the microscope like never before. *The Mirage*,³ a study from TNTP, asserts that for all the money spent on professional development, there is no clear evidence of impact:

- “Districts are making a massive investment in PD: **\$18,000/teacher/year.**”
- “Teachers do not appear to improve substantially year over year. Only three in ten teachers demonstrated substantial improvement.”
- “There is no evidence that any particular kind or amount of PD consistently helps teachers improve.”
- “School systems are not helping teachers understand how to improve or even that they need to.”

1 Guskey, T. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press.

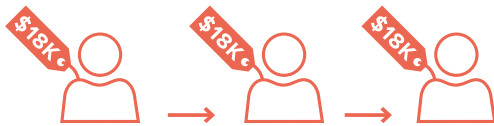
2 Killion, J. (2008). *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

3 *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development*. (2015, August 4). Retrieved September 24, 2015, from <http://tntp.org/publications/view/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development>



VS

THE FINDINGS



*We don't know enough about **how** professional learning is impacting practice and student learning, if at all.*

Although we could debate research methods or comment on sample sizes and process, this scrutiny has made one thing clear: we don't know enough about how professional learning is impacting practice and student learning, if at all.

Taking Another Look at Professional Learning

While it's tempting to get discouraged or give up, we can choose to move beyond hyperbole and focus on this chance to really rethink professional learning, envisioning an environment where teachers' valuable time is spent solely on meaningful professional learning experiences stemming from their students' learning needs.

In this, we have collegial support. *The Mirage* suggests we change the questions we ask by rethinking three areas:

What if teachers spent their valuable time on meaningful professional learning experiences stemming from their students' learning needs?

RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



1

Redefine

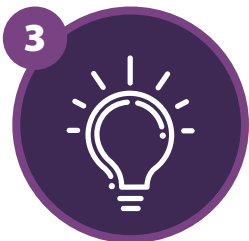
what it means to help teachers improve.



2

Reevaluate

existing supports and programs.



3

Reinvent

how we support effective teaching at scale.

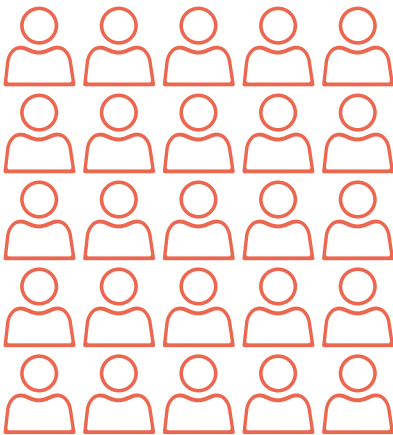
This work has already been started. Thought leader Learning Forward convened a group of 25 leaders to study how to better measure professional learning outcomes. Their recommendations⁴ include:

1 Define the critical elements of professional learning systems that are essential to supporting teachers to bring effective teaching practices to scale.

2 Establish tools and resources that help all educators measure the return on investment and impact of teacher supports and other models of professional development so they can make well-informed decisions.

3 Leverage the collective intelligence and work of the partners to invent new strategies and systems that take effective teaching and learning to scale and eliminate all barriers along the way.

25 PL LEADERS



Many others have also contributed to the groundswell. For example, Jane Cogshall, Principal Researcher with the American Institutes for Research, notes how appropriate professional learning opportunities need to be taken by the right teachers at the right time. She talks about the importance of observing and discussing professional learning. This can include looking at learning team meetings, mentor/coach interactions and other focused learning designs.⁵

Common themes are emerging as collective thinking in the field grows. We are seeing the increasing importance of technology to enhance professional learning, and we can also learn from districts who are already rethinking professional development. As a result, here are some best practice recommendations — organized around the *Mirage* framework — to rethink how your district approaches professional learning.

⁴ From mirage to reality: Redesign professional learning to improve classroom teaching. (2015, August 4). Retrieved September 24, 2015, from <http://learningforward.org/who-we-are/announcements/press-releases/2015/08/04/from-mirage-to-reality-redesign-professional-learning-to-improve-classroom-teaching>

⁵ Cogshall, J. (2015, September 2). Getting Beyond the Mirage of Professional Development. Retrieved September 24, 2015, from <http://educationpolicy.air.org/blog/getting-beyond-mirage-professional-development>



1. Redefine

Redefine What It Means to Help Teachers Improve

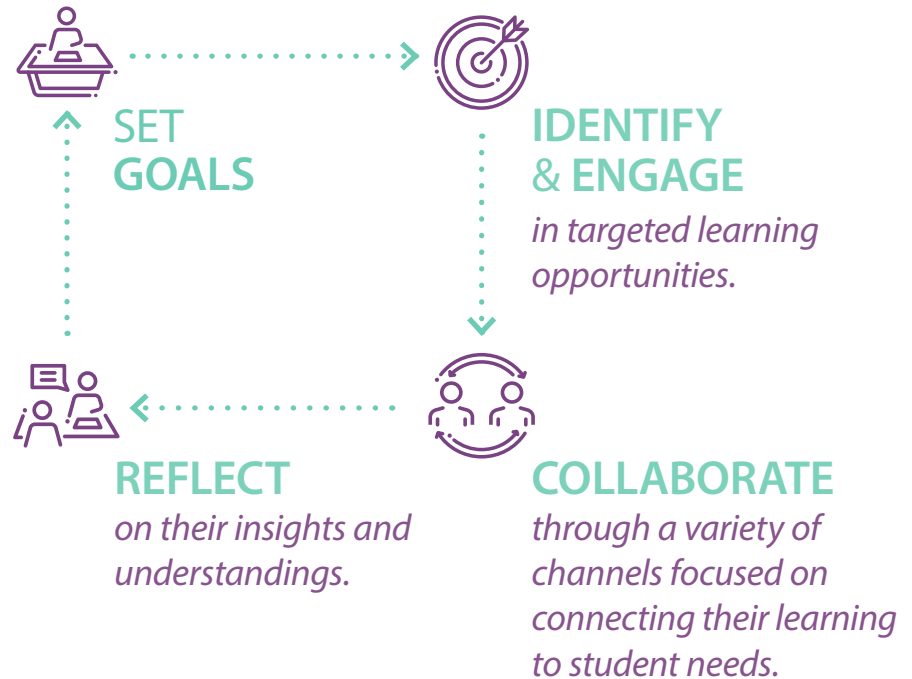
Encouraging teachers to take ownership of their professional learning is an important step.

While it may be easier to count hours and track credits, simply offering a catalog of learning choices is no longer enough. At the heart of it, the focus needs to be on empowering teachers to guide their own learning. This should be based on identified student needs and should take place in job-embedded, ongoing, collaborative settings. And, reflection is needed to identify what was effective (and what wasn't).

There is more than one way to approach this work, but taking small steps can be a good way to begin. First, we need to raise awareness of why we pursue professional learning and personal responsibility. Second, we can look to technology systems to support this goal by tracking all forms of professional learning in a visible, learning-focused way. Teachers can set goals, choose targeted learning opportunities and collaborate through a variety of channels focused on connecting their learning to student needs. At the end of the process, teachers can use online tools to reflect on what they've learned.

At the heart of it, the focus needs to be on empowering teachers to guide their own learning.

Flexible, practical and reportable online tools enable teachers to:



Action Item #1

Provide teachers with self-service tools to drive their own learning, in order to create a direct connection between professional learning and practice changes in the classroom.

Professional learning systems can also fuel the goal-setting process by helping teachers identify where to focus through automatic recommendations, needs assessments and self-reflection data. From these goals, we can track outcomes from learning designs that have the most promise, such as learning teams, action research, coaching and mentoring, lesson study and more, as well as traditional models of learning.

It's essential that we understand structured reflection as action-oriented and about connecting new learning to planned changes in the classroom. As we do this, completing a summary form will be a powerful first step to evaluating the effectiveness of each new professional learning experience.

Wondering what this looks like in action?

A Look at the Learning:

Holyoke Public Schools, MA

11 schools | 5,782 students | 503 teachers | 1,000 total staff

We have restructured professional learning management in our district to put teachers in charge of their learning. Teachers now log in to complete their exit tickets (feedback forms) by thinking about what they will apply, track their professional development progress and history and browse goal-aligned opportunities. This was a shift from principals and facilitators managing the process to teachers having the opportunity to make meaningful professional development choices for themselves.

We use the feedback forms as a tool for educators to reflect on their experiences, and facilitators use response reports to shape their offerings. Our greatest step forward is the use of customized reflection forms, because the forms are tailored to the specific approach and often help extend the work by calling on educators to reflect and make commitments to change practice at multiple points throughout the year. (These responses are then followed up with coaching and other forms of professional development extension). We are using this data as formative assessment just like a classroom teacher.

We also utilized mentor logs for our comprehensive induction program and our English Language Learner Leads. Proposal forms have increased ownership by allowing teachers to suggest professional learning opportunities that relate to their needs.

Using an online system is a “one stop shop” for our teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and active collaboration. The digital tools help ensure that real change is happening.

Educators in the Berkshires of Massachusetts give us a real-life example. There, educators are setting goals, reflecting on their learning, connecting new ideas to practice and proposing additional professional learning approaches to meet their specific needs.

Over 2 Years:

4,404

TOTAL
REFLECTIONS

▲
809%
INCREASE
in Teacher Proposals

Katie Silva

Director of Recruitment and
former Director of Talent and
Professional Development



2. Reevaluate

Reevaluate Existing Supports and Programs

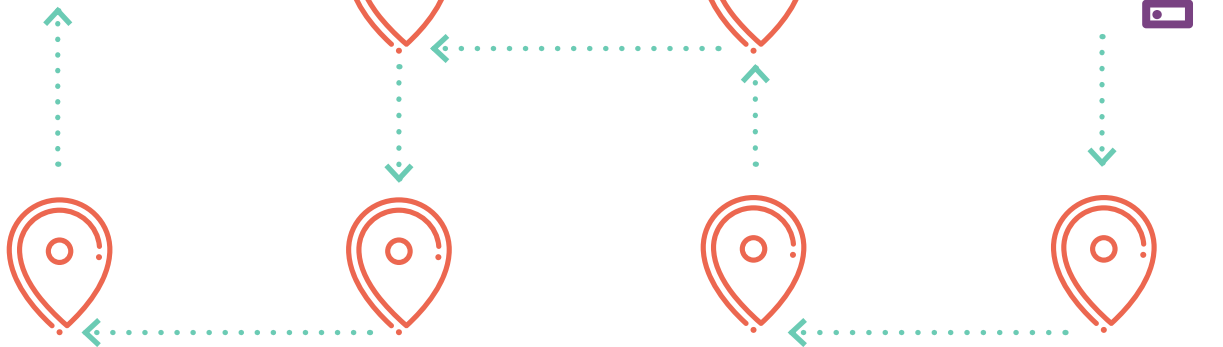
We've looked at strengthening teacher ownership. Now, we need to direct a laser focus toward practical application and study of impact.

Empowered teachers can examine their own professional learning through ongoing planning, implementation and self-reflection. This means working to explicitly link professional learning, practical application in the classroom (or library media center, gym or elsewhere) and student learning. We can focus adult learning by identifying student goals and then mapping backward to lay out what we as educators need to learn.

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IDENTIFY STUDENT GOALS

YOU ARE
HERE



Technology can help as we reevaluate adult learning:



ONLINE TOOLS

can help individual teachers, pairs and teams document their learning.



REFLECTION FORMS

or logs provide a straightforward way for teachers to quickly record what was learned and ideas for applying that knowledge.



INTEGRATED PL EVALUATION FEATURES

help teachers shift the focus of professional learning from simply engaging in a learning design to applying and assessing impact.

These embedded application and impact tools are integral parts of an effective management system — their purpose is to guide the educator through planning concrete practice changes to achieve the desired student results. Often this process begins with student SMART goals, followed by corresponding educator learning goals and a description of instructional approaches to implement.

Educators can use different settings and types of evidence to determine progress toward their own and their students' goals. Online "impact" tools automatically display previously entered application information and offer a way to easily note actual changes and student impact based on evidence collected. These impact reports compile data about actual outcomes from teachers who planned purposeful instructional changes. This data can include detailed information about the types of practice changes that were made as well as the rates of change shown by students.



Action Item #2

Identify and systematically collect specific data points around expected changes in practice and student learning results.

But this process extends beyond just teachers...

A Look at the Learning:

Kildeer Countryside SD 96, IL

7 schools | 3,157 students | 280 teachers | 470 total staff

The purpose of professional learning in District 96 is to increase the effectiveness of all District 96 staff in promoting student social, emotional and academic achievement. In addition to leveraging technology, one way that we achieve this purpose is through job-embedded professional learning provided by a team of instructional coaches. As we built the coaching program, we also determined ways in which we could measure the effectiveness of coaches and the impact on student achievement in a similar way to how we assess the impact of teacher professional learning. The general evaluation design is included below.

Improved Coaching Practice:

Coaches will continue to build their knowledge and skills of researched coaching practices that enhance teaching and learning in District 96.

Instruction: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners:

Coaches have a deep repertoire of instructional strategies including an emphasis on differentiation. Coaches are able to enhance classroom instructional practices in reading and math district-wide.

Evaluation of Coaching and the Coaching Program:

Collect a body of evidence to show stakeholders the effect of the coaching program on teacher and student learners by the end of the school year.

We have successfully used the threaded discussion and file-sharing tool in our professional development management system for many years as a place where staff can reflect and respond to each other's thoughts regarding instructional practice. We are planning to use this feature for coaches to reflect on differentiation and the work they are doing with teachers. We will also be using application and impact level tools to measure the application and impact of differentiation strategies that are being implemented in the classrooms. Log forms will be used to monitor the interactions between coaches and teachers, including the coaches' reflections on their work with teachers.

Building from the work with teachers, instructional coaches in a northern suburb of Chicago are studying how their own professional learning is impacting teachers and their students.

2 SMART goals that guide this work:

1. By May 2016, 95% of staff in case study classrooms will have increased evidence of differentiation practices throughout their instruction.

This evidence will measure the impact of coaching on teacher practice and student growth through surveys, student artifacts and achievement data, observations and interviews.

2. By May 2016, 90% of students in case study classrooms will demonstrate evidence of increased student growth on the NWEA MAP assessment. We will gather evidence regarding the impact of coaching on teacher practice and student growth by utilizing several features of our file-sharing tool in our professional development management system.

Jeanne Spiller

Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning, Curriculum & Instruction



3. Reinvent

Reinvent How We Support Effective Teaching at Scale

To scale effective instructional practices, we need to first understand which learning designs and experiences lead to the best results. Looking at a number of data points will help districts spend money wisely and focus on only the most valuable learning experiences.

One best practice approach is to use an online planning tool to map out district-wide strategic adult learning initiatives — such as upper elementary teachers working on deepening their science pedagogical content knowledge, or high school English and World Language teachers expanding their ability to use complex texts to teach higher order thinking skills. For each role — teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, instructional coaches, central office staff and even parents — these plans include all adult learning experiences geared to meet the shared student goals, as well as corresponding measures to evaluate results.

A year-long plan may include a Summer Institute, PD days throughout the year and regular coaching or focused time during team learning meetings — all related to achieving a common set of targeted goals. With each learning experience aligned to the plan, we can collect, organize and analyze application and impact data based on how new learning from multiple experiences across the plan has been applied. This approach recognizes that changes in teaching and student impact occur not as the

We need to first understand which learning designs and experiences lead to the best results.



result of one or even a few professional learning experiences, but over a period of time and in numerous settings — coherence and focus are essential.

To support these efforts, a comprehensive professional learning management system can provide hundreds of reports for progress monitoring, formative assessment and summative analysis to inform scale-up decisions. These reports include:



TIME SPENT

on specific district, building and personal goals.



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SPENDING

by funding source and category.



ALIGNMENT

to teacher and student learning standards.



IMPACT EVALUATION

by professional learning format.



Action Item #3

Collaboratively analyze application and impact data, then reflect on the process and results to inform replication and scale-up decisions.

Carefully observing professional learning and classroom practice and analyzing log forms, impact data, funding and other reports — all of these things can help us demonstrate which learning experiences are having the most impact. This work will help us reinvent how we scale effective teaching practices, plus it helps districts and educators set professional learning priorities by seeing where further growth is needed.

How are districts using the data to spark real change?

A Look at the Learning:

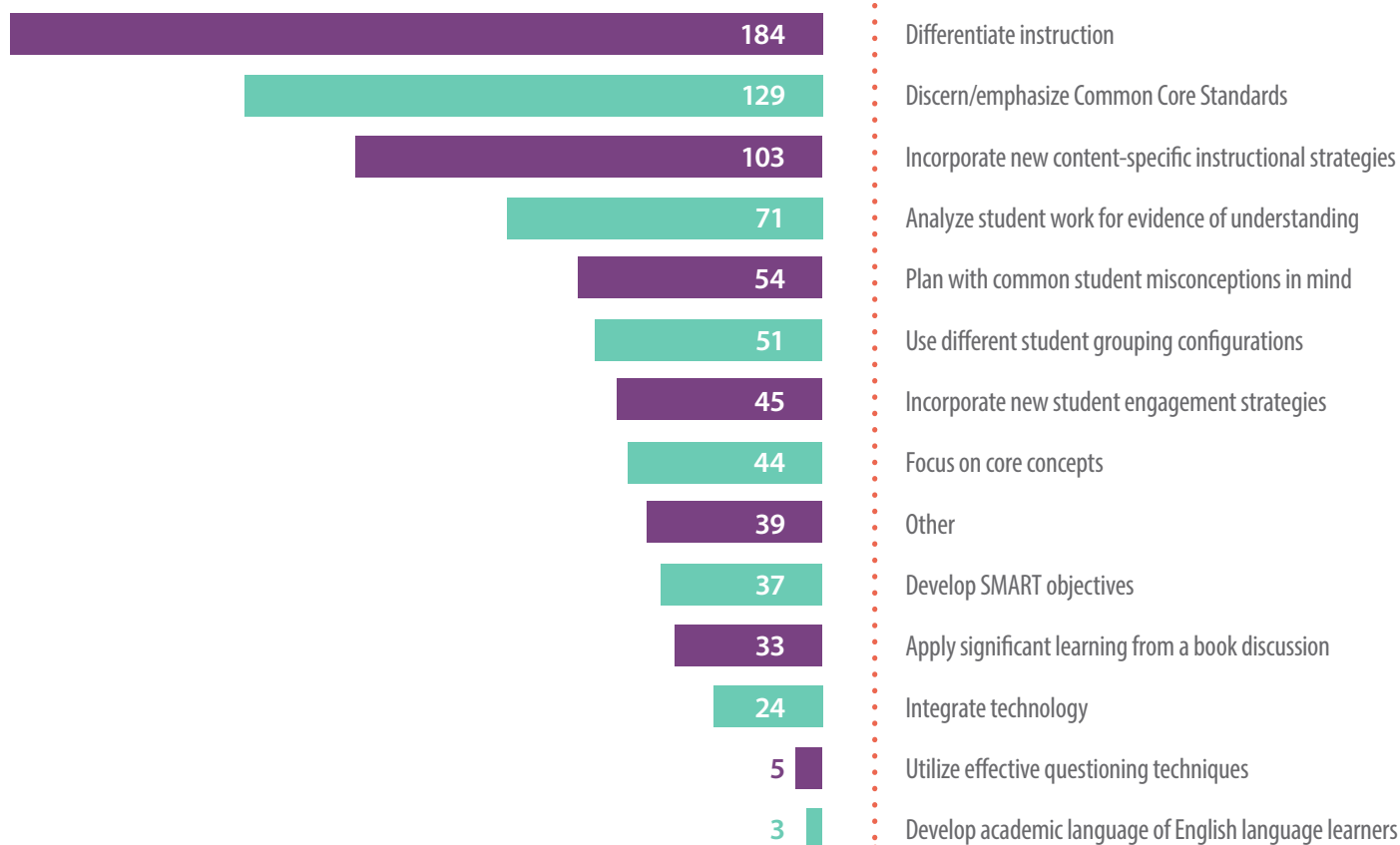
Greece Central SD, NY

20 schools | 11,602 students | 941 teachers | 2,116 total staff

While we still have an online professional learning catalog populated with many different learning experiences, including tracking our PLC Meetings and Collegial Circles, we are changing the culture of professional learning in our district to focus on applying learning and collaboratively analyzing results.

This data is an example of responses to one of our application questions:

What changes do you plan to make in the classroom as a result of your new learning?



The Professional Development Committee in Greece Central School District — New York State's seventh largest — is examining Professional Learning Community (PLC) outcome data to shape professional learning policy and scale-up plans.

Continued on next page...

Greece Central School District

Continued...

Average Number of
LOG SUBMISSIONS
per Teacher:

2012-13: **3**

2013-14: **7**

133%

INCREASE

Marguerite Dimgba
Professional Learning Director

Sheila Robinson
Teacher on Special Assignment

Our PDC (Professional Development Committee) has looked at the data from more than 1,700 log entries submitted last year, which are used to document learning and action steps from job-embedded PD structures. The group's goal was to figure out what is working to help determine what to prioritize, emphasize and scale. These are some learnings from that initial process:

1

The quality of the application or impact question asked has the greatest impact on the data analysis process.

2

*Rather than have someone at the district office analyze the PD data and tell us what to make of it, **we took ownership of the task and the data**, making sense of it to inform our work.*

3

The collaborative process includes good item design and recognizing that the data we capture serves multiple audiences — our instructors, our policy board and our administration.

4

*We can accomplish this work together and we hope, with members representing every school in our district, that **we have begun to spread a positive culture of evaluation** throughout the district.*

We have more job-embedded professional development going on now than ever and teachers are recording impact outcomes. Unpacking our analysis, we recognize that in the years we had math and literacy coaches, there were more logs completed. With increased numbers of teachers facilitating site-based learning, we are working on developing a common understanding of what professional learning looks like to ensure that all forms of learning are tracked and fed into the data pool for impact analysis.

Looking ahead, we are considering how to enhance the richness of the data, especially responses to open-ended questions. It's a high challenge to get people to write about their learning and experiences although we see the impact in the classrooms.

Moving Forward

We do know — quite a bit — about what works in terms of how to rethink professional learning. This calls for evaluating impact more tactically and consistently, as well as engaging educators directly by slowing down to look at what’s happening in the fast-paced complexity that we call teaching and learning.

Eventually this must become part of our daily routine. It will come through listening to the international dialogue, gleaning ideas from authors and research studies, learning from educators who are deeply engaged in how they approach this, and applying best practices and tools. Together, these should inform a cycle of continuous improvement. Technology is vital in helping us to realize this vision by making the work feasible and visible — taking great ideas from theory to practice, from planning through evaluation.

Navigating all of this isn’t easy. It’s an ongoing process, comprised of many cycles of reflection and application to move us forward. If we get it right, the rewards will be enormous for our society and our future.

Simply tracking hours and managing a menu of offerings is not going to get us there. We need to rethink what meaningful professional learning looks like and then support districts and educators in making it happen across our districts and across our country. This will involve learning collaboratively, reflecting and taking time to frequently look at what we’ve done and how well it has worked. Moving ahead, we must make these practices the norm. There are school systems today using proven technology designed to support this redefinition of professional learning. Quasi-experimental studies are not required to move this forward. Let’s continue the conversation. Let’s continue learning from and with our colleagues.

If we steer this work effectively, we can go from stewing about spending \$18,000 per teacher to impacting 18,000 students — and many more.

With some real focus, structure and tools, it can be the best of times to take part in the journey that is educator professional learning.

*If we get it right,
the rewards will be
enormous for our
society and our future.*



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