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Making the case: Transforming teacher professional learning

By Joanna Michelson, Director of Teacher Leadership and Learning

MARCH 2019 | PART OF THE LEADERSHIP GUIDE FOR K-12 TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Brief overview in one page

Classrooms that are truly transformative for students require adults to work and learn differently than they typically do. This guidance brief from the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership reflects our current thinking of teacher professional learning as a key driver to creating transformative classrooms. It also reflects our thinking about how transformative teacher learning can become part of the fabric of the daily life of educators. The brief has three purposes it: 1) makes a case for why teacher professional learning may fall short, 2) suggests a vision for transformative teacher learning, and 3) offers initial recommendations for first steps.

Key professional learning challenges facing leaders

While the features of effective professional learning have been known for decades, investments in teacher learning do not consistently yield results for students because:

- Leaders from the classroom to the central office may not yet have the **vision** for what transformed teaching and learning ultimately looks like and what students may be able to do.
- Professional learning **cultures** at schools have tended to work against teacher and school leader innovation, meaningful collaboration and improvement.
- There is often a **misalignment** with actual student learning needs, too many initiatives, and missing teacher ownership**.**

Where leaders might start

- Gather a team of leaders (teachers, coaches, principals) to start to study the most pressing problems of student learning at the school.
- Analyze, along with your team, the structures and culture of teacher collaboration and learning that is in place now.
- Consider the relationship currently between student learning problems and the teacher professional learning and collaboration you have.

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Introduction

We have often said that teaching isn't rocket science – *it's harder*. While debatable among rocket scientists, this catchy phrase drives home an important point. The general public may think teaching is easy, but as anyone who has spent time in the classroom as a teacher knows, it is anything but.

If teaching were easy, then it stands to reason that *all* students would be achieving at high levels. However, the fact remains that too many kids are drastically behind, especially when you consider the disparities for children divided along the lines of race, class and language. Unfortunately, our society's long-standing economic, political and social problems have created an environment filled with systemic barriers to student learning.

Education experts agree that high-quality teaching is the most important school-based factor in improving educational outcomes for students. School leadership is a close second. Our experience has shown, however, that educators have yet to develop the teaching expertise or instructional leadership needed to overcome the systemic barriers to student learning and create classrooms where all students can access rigorous grade-level content and thinking with increasing agency and independence. Unsurprisingly, as recent reports conclude, the systems of traditional professional development and support available to teachers have overwhelmingly failed to help them get better at providing powerful learning experiences for their students.

A vision for students

We know that learning experiences in schools can transform students' perspectives, abilities, lives and communities in and beyond school. We believe all students can engage in rigorous thinking and work when given access to grade-level content and high-quality curricula with appropriate support**.** We strive to create classrooms where *all* students work together to solve problems, take ownership of their ideas and thinking, and have agency in how they learn and engage. These are places where students develop meaningful relationships with each other in a learning environment where their cultures, languages and backgrounds are viewed as strengths.

Barriers to improving teaching and learning

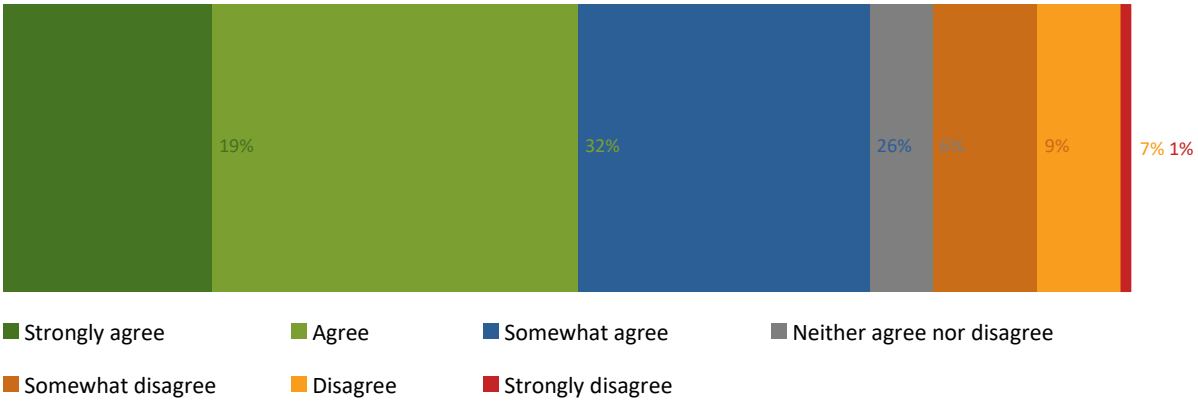
Classrooms like the ones we envision do not happen by accident. Classrooms that are truly transformative for students require adults to work and learn differently than they typically do. While we have known for decades the features of effective professional learning, as findings from The New Teacher Project's Mirage study (2015) highlighted, investments in teacher learning do not consistently yield results for students**.** There are several barriers to creating the learning environments we want.

Lack of a vision

First, teachers and school leaders may not yet have the **vision** for what this teaching and learning ultimately looks like and what students can do. They may not yet know what kinds of teaching position students as owners of their own learning, and as a result, they have not experienced students succeeding in these ways. Sadly, low expectations on the part of both teachers and students often become self-fulfilling prophecies. When educators develop and unconsciously communicate beliefs that some students "can't learn something," they inadvertently close off opportunities to teach and learn differently. We find that educators can unintentionally reinforce their own belief this way.

We conducted a survey of educators (download the survey results) and found that more than 75% of them report struggling to connect student learning needs to required shifts in teaching practice (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Leaders and teachers in my system struggle to connect student learning barriers and problems to associated teacher professional learning needs. (N=626)

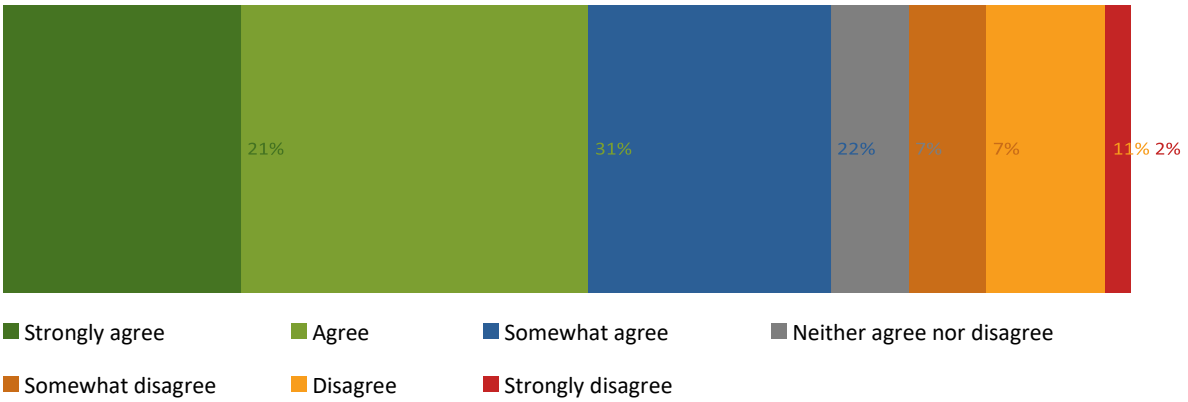


A culture at odds with improvement

Second, professional learning **cultures** at schools have tended to work against teacher and leader innovation, meaningful collaboration, and improvement. Traditionally, structures and cultures in schools have driven teachers to work in relative isolation. Recent efforts to increase collaboration among teachers have created new dialogue about student work, data and curriculum, but have yet to deliver on the promise of creating cultures where teachers work together flexibly and authentically to study and solve student learning problems of practice.

Figure 2 below shows that nearly 75% of educators responding to our survey believe that their school systems have underestimated the conditions needed to improve teaching practice. These conditions include both culture and structures.

Figure 2: Leaders and teachers in my school system underestimate the conditions needed to foster the improvement of teaching practice. (N=621)

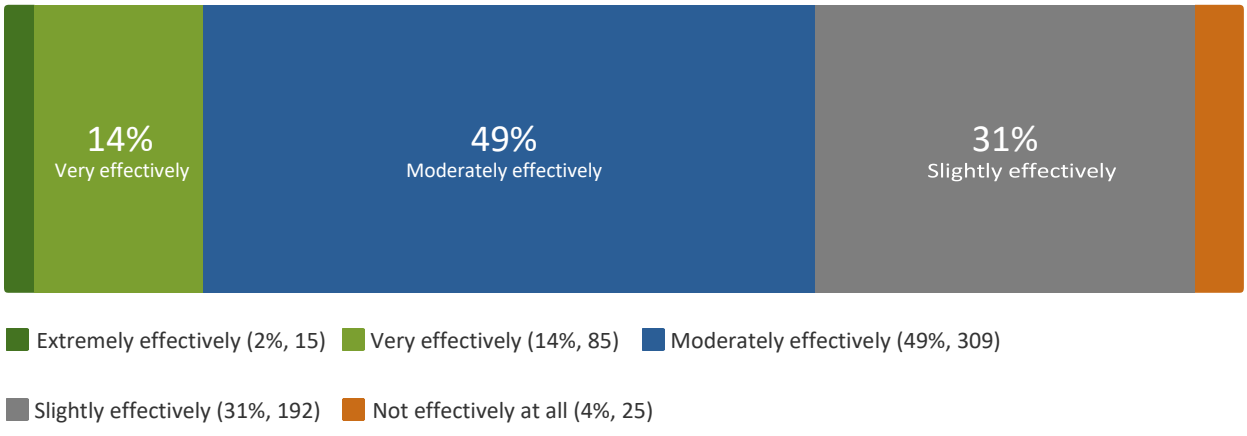


Ineffective professional learning: missing teacher voice and misalignment with needs

Third, teachers in even the best of professional learning structures may not have input into what they are learning and why — resulting in learning that feels **misaligned** and far from student needs. Also, for too many systems, professional learning may come in the form of disconnected, conflicting and unsupported initiatives. Furthermore, traditional professional learning does not always include opportunities for teachers to truly *get better* in their classrooms through coaching and deliberate practice with feedback.

Feedback from educators responding to our survey bears out these mixed results for teacher learning. In Figure 3 below, roughly 80% of educators indicate that their past investments in teacher learning have been only moderately or slightly effective in yielding results for students.

Figure 3: Overall, how effectively have your teacher professional learning efforts performed with regard to improving academic outcomes for students? (N=626)



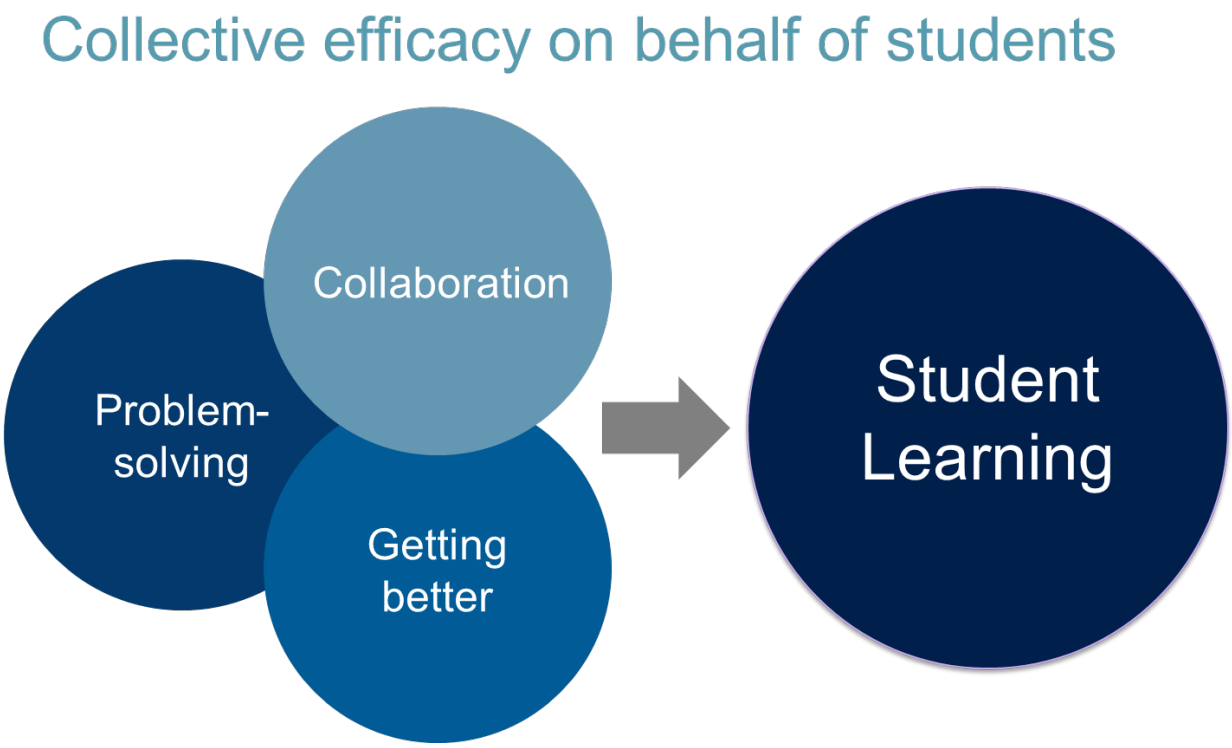
A vision of collective efficacy for teachers and principals

Research has found that when there is a sense of collective efficacy at a school, or a belief that teachers working together can positively affect students, students perform better (Donohoo, Hattie & Eells, 2018; Visible Learning, 2018, para. 1). These environments are places where leaders and teachers collaborate, problem solve, and take risks to *get better* together (see figure 4 below). We want teachers to know their collaborative work matters for student learning. Also, we want school leaders to set intentional conditions for how teachers experience the collective process of studying problems of practice together.

Research and our experience tell us that teachers thrive in schools where they are engaged and empowered to work together on behalf of students. We envision schools where teachers work together the way that we want students to work together — places where teachers explore real questions that matter for their students' success, take risks with their practices, and constantly examine the impact on their students. We also know from research that this collaboration and learning also best occur in the context of high-quality instructional materials (Hirsh, 2019).

Figure 4 below represents CEL's current thinking about the "micro-cultures" that exist and interact in schools where there is collective efficacy. We explore below what we mean by each of the micro-cultures.

Figure 4: Collective efficacy on behalf of students



Collaboration

In schools with collective efficacy, teachers and leaders collaborate on a regular basis with a firm focus on the link between student learning and what they can do about it. In these settings, teachers study meaningful student work in the context of standards and high-quality instructional materials. They consider together what that student work says about what students *can do* and what they are *on the verge of* doing well. They plan for changes in instruction based on what they see in student work. While many schools have structures and protocols for collaboration in place, we find that this collaboration may not truly result in improvement in teaching and student learning. Sometimes collaboration is focused on getting important tasks accomplished instead of examining the relationship between student learning and teaching practice.

We consider collaboration in the context of the other two circles: getting better and problem solving. We explore these ideas below.

Questions to consider

- What is the current state of collaboration in your school? How are teachers collaborating? What is the focus of that time? What role do teachers' instructional materials play? What are the teaching practice and student learning outcomes of that time, and how do you know?
- How can leaders in your setting collaborate within and innovate around the structures of a school day and year to create more space for collaboration?

Leadership recommendation

- Invest time in studying how teachers are currently collaborating. Observe that time, survey teachers, and take stock of what is being accomplished and how.

Problem-solving

In schools where there is collective efficacy, problems of student learning – both chronic and acute – drive the work of all staff members. In fact, it is these challenges of student learning that become the focus of teacher collaboration. They work together with a bias toward action as they analyze the needs students present in their work and frame the issues they see as problems they can solve. Teachers might collaboratively examine student work and identify a common need, then generate and test solutions to see what best supports student learning. They then might rigorously study their solutions to see which is having the greatest effect and what adjustments still need to be made. In many schools, individual teachers have this problem-solving stance, but in schools with collective efficacy, teachers engage in this work together for even greater impact.

Questions to consider

- How do teachers and leaders currently work together (with and without support) to understand problems of student learning?
- How do you ensure students are the starting point and remain the ongoing focus of your professional learning?

Leadership recommendations

- Engage teachers and leaders in exploration of pressing *common* problems of student learning at their grade level and how they know those are problems.
- Develop a shared understanding of a problem of student learning you are trying to solve. This may require an action plan for gathering more data.

Getting better

Ultimately, if schools are going to transform students' experiences, educators will need to take a stance that they can improve and get better all the time. Ideally, as educators collaborate and identify problems of student learning to tackle, they also identify areas of teaching that can be refined. We know that improving teaching practice, like improving anything, requires an openness to learning as well as technical support in *how* to improve. In schools with collective efficacy, teachers expect to receive coaching and feedback as they experiment with their teaching practices. This coaching and feedback will result in improvements in teaching that lead to improvements for students. A culture and process for *getting better* is critical to collective efficacy – or the belief that teachers can *together* impact students through their teaching.

Questions to consider

- To what extent is there a culture of *getting better* in place at my school?
- What are the structures and processes we have for supporting teachers in improvement of teaching practice?

Leadership recommendations

- Assess the ways in which teachers are supported when they are attempting new practices. When and how do they receive real-time coaching and feedback as they work on the "how"?
- Determine/utilize processes for feedback that help teachers examine the impact of their practice by connecting what they do to the effect it is having on students (e.g., "When you did _____, students were able to … ").

Where leaders might start

- Gather a team of leaders (teachers, coaches, principals) to start to study the most pressing problems of student learning at the school.
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References

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Resources

This guidance brief is part of the Leadership Guide for K-12 Teacher Professional Learning.

The Leadership Guide for K-12 Teacher Professional Learning

Investments in teacher learning have not consistently yielded results for students. Creating classrooms where all students develop agency and efficacy requires a new approach to how teachers help them learn and engage. The Leadership Guide for K-12 Teacher Professional Learning is for leaders in classrooms, schools and school systems who want coherent, authentic, sustainable, and effective teacher learning aimed at improving outcomes for students. This multipart guide provides practical guidance for leaders, whether they are making the case for transforming teacher learning in their setting, implementing a sustainable approach, or seeking support for scaling and extending effective practices.

Planned resources in 2019:

- A teacher professional learning insights survey.
- Guidance on making the case for transforming teacher professional learning.
- Guidance on how to structure ongoing, sustainable and effective professional learning.
- A partnership prospectus describing how CEL can support your teacher learning efforts.

View all available resources at https://www.k-12leadership.org/teacher-professional-learning.

Essential reading

- *Leading for professional learning: What successful principals do to support teaching practice* (2018) by Anneke Markholt, Joanna Michelson and Stephen Fink.

How CEL can help

We partner with courageous leaders in classrooms, schools and the systems that support them to eliminate educational inequities by creating cultures of rigorous teaching, learning and leading.

We customize our services to your unique professional learning needs and problems of student learning.

Interested in bringing the Center for Educational Leadership's services to your school system? Contact us at edlead@uw.edu or (206) 221-6881 and we'll be in touch to discuss a plan and pricing tailored to your needs.

About the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership

The University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) was founded in 2001 as a nonprofit service arm of the University of Washington College of Education, one of the top education schools in the country. CEL's North Star is a vision of transformed schools empowering all students, regardless of background, to create limitless futures for themselves, their families, their communities and the world. We partner with courageous leaders in classrooms, schools and the systems that support them to eliminate educational inequities by creating cultures of rigorous teaching, learning and leading. CEL's faculty, staff and consultants come from research institutes, state education offices, school and district administration offices, and K-12 and college classrooms. For more information, visit https://www.k-12leadership.org.