

Building Better Professional Development:

Designing Teacher Learning That Mirrors Powerful Classrooms



In this brief, we draw on research and practice to outline key principles of high-quality professional development and share a practical tool for evaluating professional learning sessions.

Professional development (PD) is a critical lever for improving teacher practice, but it rarely delivers the powerful results it aims to achieve.

This is true for a variety of complex reasons and at least one that's almost shamefully simple: educators are often subjected to PD designed in ways we would never accept for the teaching of students. While we strive to bring inquiry, equity, collaboration, and productive struggle into classrooms for students, we accept PD for teachers that relies on lectures, handouts, and one-off sessions. These efforts generally fail to engage adult audiences, and they rarely shift practice.

Perhaps we tolerate this because teachers are accomplished learners, so we imagine that they'll be able to efficiently extract the lessons for

practice from PD, regardless of its design. This is a mistake. Even skillful learners need rigor, purpose, and opportunities to make meaning in order to do the difficult work of evolving their practice.

At Springpoint, our work designing professional learning alongside high-quality, project-based curriculum has increasingly pushed us to ask: **What would it look like for educator professional development to mirror the kinds of learning experiences we want for students?** From our own pilot work and a deep interrogation of experts and existing research, we arrived at a set of five principles that we believe are essential for creating robust and meaningful professional learning experiences that can truly impact classroom practice.

Symmetric

Teachers Should Learn the Way Students Learn

In strong classrooms, students learn by actively constructing understanding, engaging in discussion, taking intellectual risks, and reflecting on their thinking. Adult learning occurs through the same processes, and PD should reflect this: the structure of PD should mirror desired student learning experiences. For example, PD experiences should begin with an engaging activity requiring sense-making, dialogue, and interpretation. This ensures that adult learners are immediately asked to grapple with key content. Just like in an engaging classroom, PD should ask teachers to experience cognitive demand from beginning to end. The goal is to create in the PD experience the kind of classroom culture we hope teachers will create for their students: focused, participatory, and intellectually generous.



Practice-oriented

Change Requires Doing, Not Just Knowing

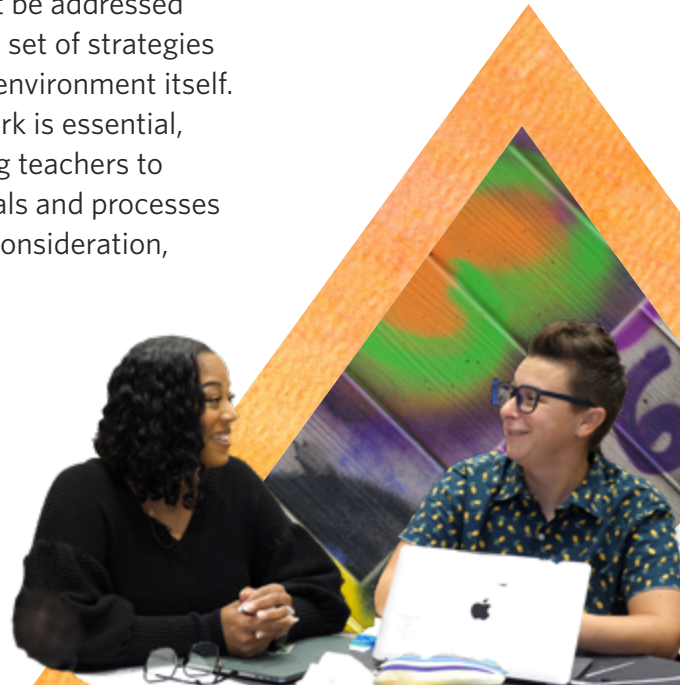
Practice sits at the center of effective professional learning. Teachers need structured opportunities to try instructional moves, use tools, and experience “small wins” that build confidence. Shifting professional learning experiences from the abstract to the actual, moves teachers from “thinking about” to doing - the same shift we want them to work towards in their classrooms. Whether it's working collaboratively to identify strengths and gaps in a proposed activity, making concrete revisions to an evaluation tool, or rehearsing key discussion moves with peers, doing actual work creates opportunities for teachers to justify their thinking and helps surface misunderstandings and bad habits that otherwise might remain invisible. Moreover, the iteration this kind of work requires pushes participants to generate more authentic feedback, the kind that is truly transformative for learning.



Equity-centered

Not an Add-On, but a Design Lens

Equity cannot be an afterthought in professional learning. It must be addressed explicitly in goals, activities, and reflection. Equity is not merely a set of strategies “for certain students.” It must be a characteristic of the learning environment itself. The mindset that all students can be successful with rigorous work is essential, and educators should reflect on it repeatedly during PD. Directing teachers to constantly question how equity shows up in instructional materials and processes treats it as a central concern, reinforcing it as a practical design consideration, not simply a stated value. For example, in a session about wait time, teachers are asked to reflect on whose voices are excluded when we call on the first hand raised. This is a way of asking: Who have we made space for? Who haven’t we made space for? And how can we make space for those excluded voices?



Curriculum-based

Learning Should Connect to Instructional Materials

Effective PD grounds learning in the actual instructional materials educators will use with their students. Using training time to actually go through curricular activities as students provides invaluable insights into the student experience. This helps teachers experience first-hand the relevance of what they're asking students to learn. It is also strategic for the PD to rely on the lessons and units teachers are actively teaching with students. This makes the PD immediately applicable to improving upcoming instruction and reduces barriers to implementation. Learning a new practice and then having to translate that learning into one’s own curriculum can be a significant challenge. PD that draws its examples and practice activities directly from teachers’ existing units removes that extra step. The “transfer” is built into the PD itself, making it more likely that teachers will apply what they learn in their classrooms.



Coherent

PD as Part of a Learning Arc

Finally, strong professional learning is coherent. It connects to a small number of high-priority ideas, aligns with broader instructional goals, and builds over time. Coherence can be made visible through shared language, recurring tools, and explicit connections between the PD experience and participants' lived roles. Reflection prompts can ask educators to consider not only what they learned, but how they might turnkey the principles in their own contexts—whether as teachers, coaches, or leaders.

Coherence in professional learning also must exist over time. Across sessions and across semesters, teachers need to focus on key ideas and practice them in depth. Over the last year, for example, we engaged with a small set of New England high schools on the idea of cognitive lift. Across curricula, coaching, and professional development, as well as through follow-on work with instructional leaders, we returned again and again to both the why and the how of turning the task and ownership of thinking over to students in the classroom.



Moving Forward

Ultimately, building better PD is not about adding more activities or polishing slide decks. It is about intentional design—design that honors teachers as learners, centers equity, and treats professional learning as serious intellectual work. Our experience tells us that the way to accomplish this is to create PD that mirrors the classrooms we want for students. If we want young people to have learning experiences that are rigorous and meaningful, experiences that students engage in deeply and that make learning exciting, then we must deliver the same for our teachers. PD aligned to these five principles can be the spark that transforms teachers' professional learning into lasting instructional change.

Next Steps:

A Simple PD Evaluation Tool

Reading about effective professional learning is a start—but the real power of these principles emerges when educators use them to examine practice.

We've developed a simple PD evaluation tool which can be used as a lens for planning, reflection, or collaborative inquiry. The tool was designed for anyone who plans, participates in, or leads professional learning. It can help you generate insights about what's already strong about PD at your school or district—and how you can take it to the next level.

Here are a few ways to begin engaging with it right away.



Use the tool as a planning lens.

If you design PD—whether for a department meeting, a coaching cycle, or a district workshop—try using the tool before finalizing your agenda. Walk through each principle and ask: Where is symmetry visible? What will participants actually practice? How is equity being surfaced intentionally? Even small revisions, like shifting an opening activity or tightening the purpose of practice, can significantly strengthen the learning experience.



Evaluate PD you already attend.

The tool is just as useful from the participant seat. Try bringing it to your next professional learning session and use it as a private reflection guide. Which principles are clearly present? Which feel underdeveloped or missing? This kind of analysis can sharpen your eye for high-quality PD and give you language to advocate for more impactful learning experiences in your context.



Use it collaboratively with colleagues.

One of the most powerful uses of the tool is collective sense-making. Consider using it with a leadership team, instructional coaches, or a professional learning community to evaluate a shared PD experience. Comparing perspectives often surfaces important insights—not just about the session itself, but about differing needs across roles and contexts.



Make it part of an ongoing learning arc.

Rather than treating the tool as a one-time checklist, revisit it across the year. How are professional learning experiences building on one another? Are there consistent mindsets, practices, or tools showing up over time? Used this way, the tool supports coherence and helps teams design PD as a connected sequence rather than isolated events.



Try the meta-move: evaluate your own PD in real time.

Finally, consider inviting participants to use the tool to evaluate the PD they are currently experiencing. This kind of transparency reinforces symmetry, builds trust, and positions educators as co-constructors of learning rather than passive recipients.

At its core, the tool is an invitation: to slow down, get specific, and design professional learning with the same care we expect teachers to bring to their classrooms. When educators engage with PD thoughtfully—planning it, analyzing it, and improving it together—we move closer to professional learning that truly changes practice.



Evaluation Tool for Professional Learning Sessions

Principles of Effective Professional Learning	Are we doing it?		
	Yes!	Partially	Not Yet
<p>Symmetric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The learning experiences for teachers should mirror the desired student learning experiences in form, with clear objectives and aligned activities that shift the cognitive workload to teachers. The session builds a culture that mirrors the best classroom cultures: growth-oriented, critical, reflective, and supportive. 			
<p>Practice-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice is included that will help teachers meet critical objectives and gain facility with any needed tools. Practice is introduced with a clear rationale and strong models. Educators are likely to experience some small wins in practice. Practice concludes with metacognitive reflection. 			
<p>Equity-centered</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity is addressed explicitly in the session goals, activities, mindsets, or during time for critical reflection. Equity is not an afterthought but a key, practical consideration. 			
<p>Curriculum-based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples, tools, practice activities, etc. in the session come from instructional materials that the participants will actually use. 			
<p>Coherent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The session is one part of an arc of learning that is happening over the course of the year, connected to the school-wide and/or district instructional focus, and builds upon previous learning. Where possible, key ideas, mindsets, or core texts are referenced in ways that echo other learning experiences. 			

Acknowledgements

This brief was informed by the insights, experiences, and research of a wide range of educators, organizations, and institutions committed to advancing high-quality professional learning.

We are grateful to the leaders who shared their expertise through interviews, including Ron Berger (EL Education); Kurt Wootton and Marimar Patrón (Habla); Tina Shuster (High Tech High); Robert Hawke (National Summer School Initiative); Rachel Robertson (Novel Education Partners); and Ben Klompus (Relay Graduate School of Education). Their perspectives grounded this work in the realities of practice and innovation across diverse contexts.

Our thinking is deeply informed by foundational contributors whose work aligns with the central premise of this brief: that professional learning should mirror the rigorous, engaging, and equitable experiences we seek for students. In particular, Zaretta Hammond's work on culturally responsive teaching and cognitive development, and Peter Liljedahl's work on building thinking-centered classrooms, have strongly influenced our approach to equity, cognitive demand, and the design of learning experiences underpinned by symmetry and practice.

This brief is further informed by a broad body of research on teacher learning, curriculum-based professional development, and instructional improvement, including work from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Carnegie Foundation, the National Academies Press, TNTP, and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.

We are especially grateful to the Barr Foundation, an instrumental partner in our learning journey. Their support has enabled us to refine our thinking and design innovative, immersive professional learning experiences alongside their grantees—work that directly shaped this brief.

Selected Further Reading

For those interested in exploring the ideas behind this brief more deeply, the following resources offer a strong starting point:

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain

Zaretta Hammond — A foundational text on designing learning environments that build student independence and cognitive capacity.

Rebuilding Students' Learning Power

Zaretta Hammond — Practical guidance on strengthening students' learning muscles through intentional instructional design.

Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics

Peter Liljedahl — A highly practical framework for increasing student thinking, engagement, and participation.

Building Better Professional Learning: How to Strengthen Teacher Learning

Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) — A widely cited meta-analysis on what makes professional learning effective.

The Elements: Transforming Teaching through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning

Carnegie Corporation of New York — A clear articulation of how curriculum-based PD can drive instructional improvement.

The Good to Great Model (Vimenti Case Study)

TNTP — An applied example of how structured, practice-based professional learning can shift teaching practice.