

# Principles for High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Professional Learning

## Introduction to the Principles

### Why Professional Learning Principles?

Professional learning aligned to college- and career-ready standards has the power to improve instruction as well as student outcomes. But too often teachers are receiving incoherent professional learning that does not result in effective and equitable instructional practice or improved student achievement.

There is not one “perfect” model of professional learning, but research points to conditions that must be met for it to be effective. Walking into any given professional learning moment can and *should* look different from district to district, school to school, and even teacher to teacher, if it is to meet the unique needs of that setting. The design of each of those experiences must reflect certain research-based non-negotiables, or Principles for High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Professional Learning:

**Principle 1: Professional learning must be content-focused.** Professional learning builds teachers’ content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge necessary to teach the concepts of their discipline.

**Principle 2: Professional learning must be teacher- and student-centered.** Professional learning promotes collective responsibility for students’ learning and cultivates a dynamic culture for adult learning.

**Principle 3: Professional learning must be instructionally relevant and actionable.** Professional learning is anchored in the instructional priorities of teachers’ daily work and is sustained in a coherent system of collaborative planning, classroom practice, observation, feedback, and continuous cycles of inquiry grounded in evidence of student learning.

These Principles are intended to provide clarity and direction for those charged with selecting or designing professional learning for teachers and those who support teachers. The Principles articulate what needs to be true based on a synthesis of existing knowledge about professional learning, while leaving space for a diversity of structures to match the needs of a local setting. **All three Principles need to be reflected** for professional learning to impact instruction in a meaningful way.

## Where did these Principles come from?



Student Achievement Partners developed these Principles for High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Professional Learning by distilling existing research and listening to voices from the field. One of the first stages of the process was to survey the research base and to curate from it the essential features of effective professional learning through a lens of college- and career-ready aligned instruction. Concurrently, Student Achievement Partners interviewed stakeholders, including teachers, instructional coaches, school-building leaders, system leaders and advisors, and designers and deliverers of professional learning to learn about the experiences of the field. This knowledge review resulted in three Principles, each supported by specific descriptors that define the principle operationally to bridge theory and practice.

## How can the Principles help?

There are a number of challenges facing those who are designing, selecting, and implementing professional learning. Few resources exist to support school and district leaders in evaluating the wide range of professional learning offerings for quality and alignment to college- and career-ready standards. There is little information on the college- and career-ready standards-aligned literacy and mathematics content teachers should be learning to build on their knowledge and advance their practice. As a result, professional learning is often divorced from the instructional vision and academic priorities of a school or system, pulling teachers in various directions – at times contradictory – and offering little sustained support to teachers in applying what they have learned. A broad understanding of the evidence-based attributes that need to be present to ensure effective professional learning can start to address these challenges. The Principles for High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Professional Learning meet this need. With the common understanding of high-quality professional learning as defined by the three Principles, decision makers can begin wielding more power, whether as consumers or designers of professional learning.

This work of designing and engaging in professional learning is hard, and it is the work of many. The changes suggested by these Principles may not be simple or quick. But this change is necessary, especially for students for whom we can and must do better. When these evidence-based components are in place, teachers will begin to have the support they need to enable powerful learning for all students.

# Principles for High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Professional Learning

- 1. Content-Focused:** Professional learning builds teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge necessary to teach the concepts of their discipline. Consistent with this principle, professional learning must:
  - a. Focus on specific instructional strategies and content knowledge in literacy and mathematics<sup>1</sup> that helps teachers teach the standards for their grade and the underlying concepts of the discipline<sup>2</sup> (Ball, 2011; Jensen et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2019; Schoenfeld, 2014; Weiland et al., 2018).
  - b. Anchor pedagogical strategies within the specific context of the instructional materials being used in the classroom to inform and improve student learning (Cobb et al., 2018; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Gallagher, 2016; Jensen et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2019; Weiland et al., 2018).
  - c. Equip teachers with strategies for equitable instruction that provide all students with access to grade-level content and tasks (for example, appropriate scaffolds to access grade-level text, access prior mathematical knowledge in the context of grade-level work) (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leana, 2011; Peske & Haycock, 2006).
  - d. Ground learning in research about how students best acquire specific knowledge and skills (Gay, 2002; Gersten et al., 2010; Jensen et al., 2016; Timperley, 2007).
  - e. Project a clear vision of research-based instructional practices that are focused on student learning and support educators to make sense of the practices through hands-on and intellectually engaging approaches (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011; Gersten et al., 2010; Rhoton & Wojnowski, 2006; Timperley, 2007; Willis, 2002).
- 2. Teacher- and Student-Centered:** Professional learning promotes collective responsibility for students' learning and cultivates a dynamic culture for adult learning. Consistent with this principle, professional learning must:
  - a. Contribute to a trusting and motivating adult culture where curiosity and improvement are valued, and educators feel safe taking risks and learning from mistakes (Baum & Krulwich, 2016; Davis, 2013; Lynch et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2009; Timperley, 2007; Willis, 2002).
  - b. Challenge educators' mindsets, expectations, attitudes, and biases about students, particularly students facing barriers of racism and/or poverty, so that educators have positive views of student capabilities and high expectations for all students (Cobb et al., 2018; Timperley, 2007; Ukpokodu, 2011).
  - c. Require and support teachers to design and deliver instruction that is responsive to and respects the value of all students' backgrounds, languages, cultures, points of view, knowledge, and skills (Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
  - d. Encourage teachers and students to think critically about and respond to how representation of multiple perspectives and identities are evident in instructional materials, taking action when materials are lacking in representation (Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015; Kozleski, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> The Principles are intended to inform the creation of coherent and robust professional learning for all teachers while acknowledging the heterogeneity of students and the diversity of educator roles within any school system. Refer to other complementary, evidence-based professional learning resources for information regarding educators working across instructional disciplines and with specific student populations. For example, [Professional Development Essentials For Educators of Multilingual Learners](#) and [The National Center on Educational Outcomes](#).

<sup>2</sup> Language demands embedded within college- and career-readiness standards for English language arts, literacy, and mathematics, span interpretive, productive, and interactive linguistic competencies. Such standards require students to acquire and produce ever-increasing English language complexity as they proceed through the grades to engage in—and master—a range of disciplinary practices and performances.

- e. Solicit teacher input and feedback to inform the design and delivery of ongoing professional learning (Boston Consulting Group, 2014; Calvert, 2016; Leana, 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Santagata et al., 2011; Saunders et al., 2009).
- f. Build educators' capacity to sustain discipline-specific professional learning through development of school and/or school district content expertise in mathematics and literacy (Calvert, 2016; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009).

**3. Instructionally Relevant and Actionable:** Professional learning is anchored in instruction and is sustained in a coherent system of collaborative planning, classroom practice, observation, feedback, and continuous cycles of inquiry grounded in evidence of student learning. Consistent with this principle, professional learning must:

- a. Constantly focus and refocus what educators are learning on implications for improved student learning (Elmore, 2008; Gersten et al., 2010; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009).
- b. Organize learning experiences with teachers and teams who share the same content focus (for example, grouping by subject and grade level) so teachers can target specific, shared learning goals (Calvert, 2016; Desimone, 2011; Rhoton & Wojnowski, 2006; Lynch et al., 2019).
- c. Include regular collaborative opportunities for teachers to design, rehearse, and refine instructional practices, tasks, and assignments; examine student work to determine progress; and design the next cycle of learning and teaching (Croft et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Garrett et al., 2019; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Lynch et al., 2019; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2016; Rhoton & Wojnowski, 2006; Saunders et al., 2009; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Weiland et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2007).
- d. Provide teachers with sustained follow-up, structured feedback, and opportunities to reflect as they transfer what they've learned to the classroom (for example, through observation with a content-specific observation rubric such as the [Instructional Practice Guide](#) or other content-specific observation rubrics) (Desimone, 2011; Gulamhussein, 2013; Jensen et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2019; Russell et al., 1999; Sachs, 2004; Truesdale, 2003; Willis, 2002).
- e. Align with the school and/or school district's vision of discipline-specific instructional improvements, and be monitored by analyzing replicable evidence of teacher and student learning (Cobb et al., 2018; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Jensen et al., 2016).

## How These Principles Were Developed

Student Achievement Partners engaged in an evidence-based collaborative design process to create an actionable set of Principles. Key components of the design process included:

### Review of Existing Scholarship

Student Achievement Partners surveyed a variety of literature about effective professional learning, including quantitative, qualitative, peer-reviewed, and non-peer-reviewed research. Studies and articles were curated by conducting an internal research identification process and evaluating recommendations from partners and advisors. To distill the list of over 200 studies and articles, Student Achievement Partners first selected papers that utilized rigorous research methods (peer-reviewed, involved treatment conditions and control groups, and larger sample sizes) and included results regarding measurable student achievement. Essential features of effective professional learning associated with improved student achievement were identified. The selected qualitative research elaborated on elements of effective professional learning that were suggested in the quantitative studies. The descriptors in the Principles highlight the themes from the research studies and explanatory articles.

### Empathy Interviews

Student Achievement Partners conducted over 50 empathy interviews with teachers, instructional coaches, school leaders, system leaders, professors, and researchers. Hearing from the diverse voices of people closest to the daily challenges of designing, implementing, and experiencing professional learning provided a practical context for the evidence-based Principles.

### Contributions from Partners

Student Achievement Partners engaged with partners and advisors who served as collaborators, lending their expertise and experience to provide valuable feedback at various stages to strengthen the evidence base and message of the Principles.

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