

Needs Assessments for Professional Learning

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For many years in the field of professional learning we annually asked educators to identify their needs for professional learning. We used this information to build a program of learning experiences for teacher education within districts and schools. The thinking behind this was that by asking what people wanted, we would more likely meet their needs directly. Unfortunately the value of this thinking was flawed because needs and wants were confused. In my own experience, when I would ask teachers what they needed, they would respond with lists such as more books, fewer students, and longer planning times. These indeed were their needs. I however expected responses that included differentiated strategies to develop the writing skills of ELL students or greater proficiency with project-based learning.

Needs are data-driven, evidence-based areas for improvement. Wants are wishes that describe what we hope for, and in many cases, based on personal preference or desires. I want a Porsche; I need a form of transportation that will be reliable, efficient, and cost effective. In professional learning, I want what other districts have and the technique du jour. What I need is defined by what my students need to be successful learners.

All teachers deserve opportunities to pursue their wants and many opportunities exist to fulfill those wants. Yet the priority for professional development investment is educator learning based on student achievement data. Asking educators, “What do you want to learn?” is redundant when analyses of data from multiple assessments of student achievement reveal gaps in student learning. Those gaps are the professional learning needs.

Needs assessments for professional learning are embedded in student achievement data. They continue to be refined by conducting research to identify the instructional practices and specific curriculum enhancements that have demonstrated impact on addressing those gaps in contexts similar to those where the needs exist. This process is what NSDC refers to as the Backmapping Model for Professional Learning.

1. Analyze student achievement data to develop goals for student achievement to know the specific knowledge and skill areas in which students are underperforming and which students are most often underperforming
2. Understand the context in which those needs exist so that teacher, principal, school, and district factors that influence successful change initiatives based on professional learning are identified and ready to be address

3. Develop clear educator learning goals that specify changes in knowledge, attitude, skill, aspiration, and behavior to ensure attainment of the student achievement goals
4. Research professional learning designs, programs, and/or content to identify ones that have successfully achieved similar goals in similar contexts to identify core components to include in our program
5. Plan professional learning, the implementation of professional learning, and its evaluation to ensure success not only in implementation but also in results for educators and students
6. Support, monitor, and evaluate implementation of professional learning
7. Assess student progress and reflect on educator practice to assess the effectiveness of professional learning before implementing the process again

Whether the Backmapping Model is employed districtwide, schoolwide, or in a team of teachers, it stresses that the role of professional learning is deeply connected to the work teachers do each day in their classrooms, driven by the needs of their students, and measured in terms of results for students. It requires teachers to examine, change, and reflect on their content knowledge and instructional strategies with colleagues to refine and extend their practice throughout their career.

In sum, student-achievement needs define professional learning needs.