



# Professional Learning that Works

## A Guide for Teachers and School Leaders

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## Introduction

The *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (the Standards)<sup>1</sup> describes the key elements of quality teaching and makes explicit the knowledge, practice and professional engagement required across teachers' careers.

Implicit in the developmental framework of the Standards is the understanding that throughout their teaching life, teachers like other professionals will be actively engaged in updating and extending their professional knowledge and practice. This is necessary for them to remain effective in their role as they progress to being an exemplary classroom practitioner and a leader in the profession.

The context within which schools strive to prepare all young Australians to 'become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens'<sup>2</sup> will continue to evolve. Globalisation and technological, environmental, social, demographic and economic change and rapid and continuing advances in information communication technologies will place greater demands on, and provide greater opportunities for, young people. These changes will also place greater demands on and opportunities for teachers and school leaders.

School leaders and teachers will need to keep abreast of research findings of relevance to their professional role and of the practices that emerge from an increasing understanding of young people, their context and how learning takes place and be able to incorporate these practices into their schools and classrooms.

Engaging in professional learning will be the primary vehicle for ensuring that the practices of schools, school leaders and teachers are continually refreshed in ways that ensure their ongoing effectiveness in promoting the learning that today's and tomorrow's young people will value and need.

The purpose of this paper is to outline what constitutes effective professional learning and to provide practical advice to schools about how to implement professional learning processes that are most likely to result in improving teaching practices and improving student learning outcomes.

This focus has been adopted as it is the professional learning policies and practices within and across schools that largely determine whether or not teachers engage in relevant and powerful professional learning; professional learning opportunities are provided for all staff; and all staff are actively engaged in activities that help to grow their professional knowledge and practice. They also determine whether or not professional learning produces improvements and consistency in teaching practice; enhances teachers' sense of efficacy; and ultimately improves students' engagement and learning achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2011)

<sup>2</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008)

## What is the definition of effective professional learning?

### Key points

- Leaders' and teachers' definition of professional learning influences the practices that are adopted to promote professional learning.
- When professional learning is understood to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end the correspondence between participating in professional development and improved practice is likely to be poor.
- The purpose of professional learning is to produce more effective practice for both the individual and the school and thereby improve all students' learning.
- Schools' and teachers' professional learning practices should reflect this understanding and they should judge the effectiveness of their professional learning in light of this understanding.

One of the difficulties in discussing professional learning<sup>3</sup> is that what is commonly understood to be professional learning varies significantly. Sometimes professional learning is what happens when you attend a conference, workshop or curriculum day presentation. Sometimes it is what happens when you sit down with a colleague to plan a lesson or discuss a student's work. Professional learning can be promoted through a casual piece of advice from a colleague and one's own reading and through attendance at an international conference and exposure to the ideas of a globally-recognised educational expert. Professional learning can be concerned with promoting professional awareness (e.g. a briefing on a new policy initiative), with developing teaching competencies (e.g. a demonstration lesson) and with embedding and refining new practices (e.g. lesson observations and feedback).

However, 'real' professional learning tends to be understood as being what is experienced at the various international, national, state-wide, regional and district gatherings of teachers where a professional learning program is delivered by experts in curriculum, pedagogy, child development and other matters of high concern to school leaders and teachers. It is largely these sorts of events that schools expend their professional learning budgets on, that professional learning coordinators bring to the attention of staff, that teachers request funding to attend and that educational authorities, private providers and curriculum associations adopt to support teachers to improve their teaching knowledge and practice.

This tendency is not as strong as it was a decade or so ago, as research into the effectiveness of professional learning has highlighted that many of the practices associated with 'real' professional learning, whilst effective in raising awareness of new policies and practices, are not all that effective in bringing about improved teaching. Research is also revealing which professional learning processes are most likely to lead to teachers changing their practice and which teaching strategies and teaching techniques are most effective in improving student achievement.

A key starting point for ensuring that successful teaching practices<sup>4</sup> become ubiquitous is to ensure that the main means for achieving this, professional learning, actually contributes to the ongoing improvement of teachers' knowledge and practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Although in literature professional development is often defined as actions that promote professional learning for the purposes of this paper professional learning is used to describe all activities that support teachers to alter their teaching behaviours in ways that improve their students' learning.

<sup>4</sup> Teaching practices refer to instructional and classroom management strategies and techniques and the curriculum designed by the teacher.

A common definition of professional learning suggests that it is '*activities to develop and individual's skills, knowledge and expertise and other characteristics as a teacher*'<sup>5</sup>. Another common definition is that professional learning is '*the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one's career from pre-service teacher education to retirement*'. These definitions correctly describe professional learning as consisting of 'activities' and 'learning experiences' but avoid reference to the purpose of professional learning and fail to recognise the context in which teachers work.

Schools and systems use professional learning to support improvement and reform agendas. Individual teachers engage in professional learning to improve their knowledge and skills. Professional learning is not supposed to be an innocuous activity; it is supposed to make a difference. And while the difference should be evident in terms of an improvement in an individual teacher's practice, more importantly it should also be evident in the overall effectiveness of the school. This commitment to changing practice and acknowledgement that professional learning should not leave a school unchanged should be built into a school's working definition of professional learning. A more apt definition of professional learning to guide a school's professional learning policy and practice is as follows.

*Professional learning is the formal and informal learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that improve their individual professional practice and the school's collective effectiveness as measured by improved student engagement and learning outcomes.*

This definition of professional learning introduces an effectiveness dimension by setting the expectation that professional learning will produce changes in practice and ultimately in student learning outcomes. It acknowledges the diversity of formal and informal professional learning opportunities and activities available to teachers. It focuses on the outcomes rather than the inputs of professional learning and extends the outcome of professional learning from professional awareness, and the improvement in teaching knowledge and skills to the application of newly acquired knowledge and skills within classrooms. It also positions professional learning as being concerned with not only the learning of the individual teacher but of the whole school as it is not highly effective individual teachers or pockets of effective practice that change schools, but consistent application of effective teaching practice across the school. Finally it acknowledges that the ultimate purpose for professional learning is to improve all students' learning outcomes.

This definition counters some of the taken for granted practices that arise from and contribute to common confusions about what constitutes effective professional learning. For example, teacher accreditation agencies often stipulate that to maintain accreditation teachers need to attend a minimum number of hours of approved (i.e. real) professional learning each year. Schools tend to allocate funds for professional learning in response to individual teacher's requests to attend externally-provided professional learning events. Teachers often consider that it is their prerogative to decide whether or not they will participate in professional learning and if they so decide, it is also up to them to determine the focus for their professional learning.

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<sup>5</sup> OECD (2009)

Such practices and expectations tend to reinforce the often false perception that there is a strong link between professional learning and improved teaching practice and whole school improvement.

This definition of professional learning is premised on the view that for teachers to be effective not only must their ongoing professional learning be effective, they must also work in a setting where they can use what they know and learn. That is, to improve student learning, professional learning needs to be conceived as both a means for improving teacher effectiveness and a means for improving the effectiveness of schools and this cannot be done if decisions about professional learning are primarily viewed as the prerogative of the individual teacher.

Whilst professional learning needs to address individual teacher's needs, it needs to do so within the context of the school's overall priorities and improvement strategies. This is because a common effort from (leaders and) teachers is needed to in order for a school to improve its teaching and learning effectiveness.

## What is the link between professional learning and improved classroom practice?

### Key points

- Professional learning has long been seen as being synonymous with attending an externally provided event.
- Evidence reveals that transference from this style of professional learning into changed teaching practice is very poor.
- A school with a poor professional learning culture has low expectations that there needs to be any transference.

The literature on professional learning is extensive. A recent search of an education database using the terms “professional development” and “in-service teacher education” identified more than 34,000 references alone. A more focused search of research articles, books, websites and theses that provided information about both professional development opportunities for teachers and personal, social and/or academic outcomes for students identified only 97 studies<sup>6</sup>. Relatively few studies have tracked the impact of professional development to outcomes for students.

Research<sup>7</sup> into the effectiveness of professional learning is fairly consistent in the view that most professional learning is ineffective in bringing about improvements in teaching and student outcomes.

Surveys<sup>8</sup> of the effectiveness of professional learning activities reveal that professional learning generally consists of unfocused, fragmented, low-intensity activities, such as short-term workshops with little or no follow-up and consequently that the capacity of the profession to engage most of its members in effective modes of professional learning over the long term has been weak.

It is not only the limitations of the externally provided, one-off event that explain why there is often a poor transference between what is learnt through engaging in professional learning and what is done in the school or classroom. The expectations that school leaders and teachers have towards professional learning can also contribute to poor transference.

School leaders can inadvertently contribute to poor transference by conveying through their actions that they do not expect participation in professional learning to be a significant catalyst for change. This unintended message can be conveyed if they:

- are not strategic in the way they allocated professional learning resources
- do not require those engaging in professional learning to identify the implications that their learning has for the rest of the school
- rely on the identification of new approaches to teaching to emerge from individual staff member’s serendipitous participation in professional learning events
- do not set up processes to ensure that evidence-based teaching practices are adopted by all teachers.

Teachers can also contribute to poor transference between professional learning and improved classroom practice. This can happen if they:

<sup>6</sup> Timperley et al (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Bredeson and Scribner (2000).

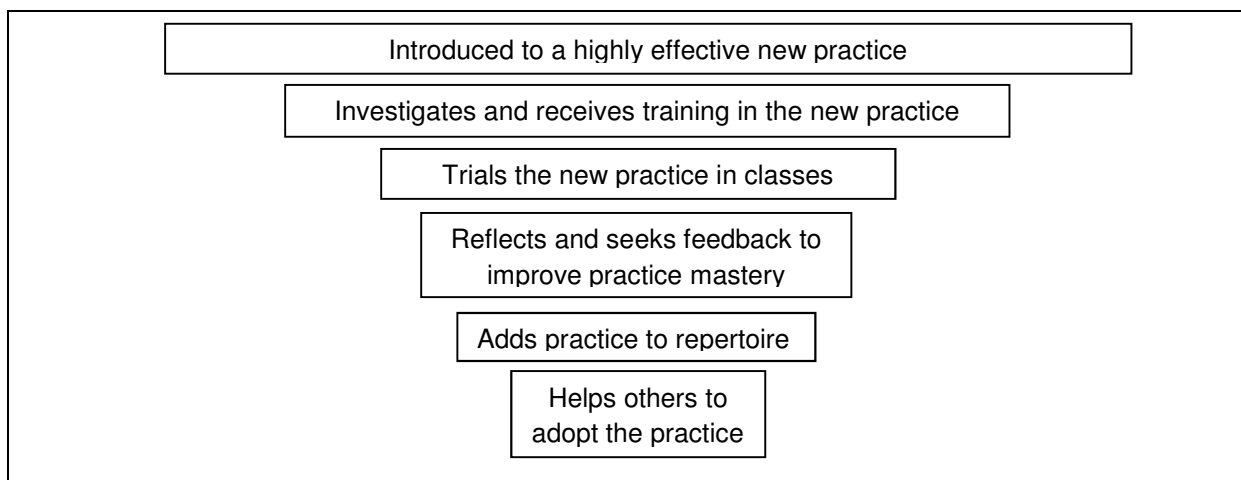
<sup>8</sup> Corcoran (1995); Ingvarson (2003); Newmann et al. (2000); and Supovitz and Turner (2000)

- consider their professional learning to be a private matter that has consequences only for them
- do not expect that their participation in a professional learning might lead to a change in their teaching practice
- are not supported to introduce improved teaching practices into their own classes
- are not held accountable for the implementation of improved teaching practices
- are not encouraged and supported to assist other teachers in the school to understand and take up the improved teaching practices.

So, even when teachers' experience of professional learning has been profound and the new knowledge they have acquired would greatly benefit their own practice and that of other teachers in their school, unless there is a positive professional learning culture within the school the transference of this learning may be very low. A single messenger has to be extremely persuasive in order to convince the majority of the school staff that a new approach should be adopted and they have to be equally tenacious to persevere with a new practice that most other teachers in the school may not endorse.

The 'funnel of professional learning transference' contained in Box 1 illustrates the point that whilst vast numbers of teachers may become informed about an evidence-based instructional practice, and many will seek further information and even receive training in the application of the new practice, the transference of this learning into practice dwindles at each stage of implementation at the school level.

*Box 1: The funnel of professional learning transference*



The challenge for schools and systems is to refine their professional learning processes and practices in ways that strengthen the link between professional learning, improved classroom and school practice and improved student learning. A starting point for this is to have a clear picture about what constitutes effective professional learning.



## What are the characteristics of effective professional learning?

### Key points

- New forms of professional learning are proving to be more effective in promoting improved practice in schools than many of the 'traditional' professional learning events.
- Research suggests that to be effective professional learning needs to be primarily school-based and school managed and focused on improving teaching practice.

The Professional Standards for Teachers developed by AITSL define the key elements of quality teaching. Effective professional learning focuses on developing the core attributes of an effective teacher. It enhances teachers' understanding of the content they teach and equips them with a range of strategies that enable their students to learn that content. It is directed towards providing teachers with the skills to teach and assess for deep understanding and to develop students' metacognitive skills.

Studies of effective professional learning have delineated several characteristics found to be related to increased teacher capacity. One synthesis<sup>9</sup> of various 'best practice' professional learning design principles concludes that to be effective professional learning needs to be:

- embedded in or directly related to the work of teaching
- grounded in the content of teaching
- organised around collaborative problem solving
- integrated into a comprehensive change process.

Another<sup>10</sup> concludes that 'to promote the kind of teacher learning that leads to improvement in teaching, professional development should concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in teachers' specific schools; provide opportunities for collegial inquiry, help, and feedback; and connect teachers to external expertise while also respecting teachers' discretion and creativity'.

It has also been suggested<sup>11</sup> that effective professional learning 'focuses on concrete classroom applications of general ideas; it exposes teachers to actual practice rather than to descriptions of practice; it involves opportunities for observation, critique, and reflection; it involves opportunities for group support and collaboration; and it involves deliberate evaluation and feedback by skilled practitioners with expertise about good teaching'.

Whilst research that questions the usefulness of traditional forms of professional learning for teachers is becoming more widely understood and more influential in changing the nature of professional learning, the 'new and improved' forms of professional learning are still at the 'looks highly promising but not proven' stage. Indeed Elmore and Burney (1997) observe that 'while we know a good deal about the characteristics of good professional development, we know a good deal less about how to organise successful professional development so as to influence practice in large numbers of schools and classrooms'.

That is, researchers are now fairly consistent in their conclusions about what doesn't work and are happy to speculate about what should work, but the time gap between when

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<sup>9</sup> McRae et al (2001)

<sup>10</sup> Newmann et al (2000)

<sup>11</sup> Elmore and Burney (1997)

professional learning occurs, teacher practice changes and student learning improves and the multiplicity of influences on a teacher that could contribute to changes in their practice makes research into 'best practice' professional learning fairly problematic at this stage.

The call for a reorientation of 'traditional' professional learning practices in schools is not based primarily on a concern about the quality of the advice and training provided in the vast majority of professional learning events which teachers attend. After all it is because of their expertise and ability to effectively communicate new knowledge and demonstrate new techniques that presenters get invited to run workshops and deliver addresses at conferences. The concern is based on the evidence of the poor transference of what is learnt in these events to the school setting.

The problem of poor transference is a result of the limitations of the professional learning delivery model. Presentations to a large, mixed audience of teachers tend to work best when they focus on conveying information of interest to a broad constituency and when for logistic reasons they do not try to teach how to implement and refine an instructional practice. They are good for alerting participants to the need for change, but not for producing change.

There is an emerging consensus about the shifts in practice that need to be needed to make professional learning more effective in bringing about teaching and learning improvements across a school. It is broadly agreed that professional learning should be primarily school-based and school managed and be focused on improving teaching practice. It is also agreed that schools need to become learning communities in which professional learning is a part of the teacher's everyday work and structured in ways that enable teachers to focus on how to become more effective practitioners.

Box 2 below summarises some of the reorientation needed in professional learning practice to make it more effective.

*Box 2: Rebalancing professional learning practices<sup>12</sup>*

<b>Traditional practice</b>	<b>strengthened by this practice</b>
Professional learning is an isolated event triggered by the individual teacher	Professional learning is a routine practice within the school
Professional learning usually equates to attendance at an externally-provided conference or workshop	Professional learning is promoted by teaching experts working in classrooms with teachers and by teachers learning from each other by sharing experiences and expertise
The professional learning focus is on the acquisition of educational knowledge (e.g. new theories, new policies and new research findings)	The professional learning focus is on the implementation of teaching strategies and mastery of teaching techniques
Individual pursuit of professional learning for individual improvement	Individual, group and whole school pursuit of professional learning for school improvement

<sup>12</sup> Source: Cole (2005)

Annual individual professional learning plans are structured around generic professional learning goals linked to annual performance management processes	Individual, group and whole school professional learning plans are structured around actions designed to promote precision teaching by skilling teachers in the use of evidence-based micro-teaching strategies and techniques
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It should be noted that the items in the left hand column are not replaced by those in the right hand column; rather it is suggested that the practices in the right hand column are to be given greater emphasis than those on the left hand column. Indeed, in some instances it might not be possible to achieve the practices in the right hand column without first experiencing the practices in the left hand column.

For example, it is likely that teachers who are astute at regularly sourcing workshops where expert advice is provided that enhances their curriculum content knowledge and guides their teaching practice would deliver engaging and effective lessons. The problem though is that few teachers can be afforded the opportunity to regularly attend external professional learning events; not all teachers are skilled enough to transfer into their own classroom practice what they heard or saw once at a workshop; and the vast bulk of teachers would not be able to find a professional learning activity that was tailored to meet their particular learning needs.

Box 3 summarises some of the tradition professional learning practices that need to be replaced.

*Box 3: Rebalancing professional learning practices<sup>13</sup>*

<b>Traditional practice</b>	<b>replaced by this practice</b>
No expectation of contributing to colleagues' professional learning	Contributing to colleagues' professional learning is common practice
Professional learning plans are a private matter and are not made public	Teachers' professional learning plans, and particularly the teaching practices that are the focus of these plans, are made public so that teachers with a common learning focus can support each other and teachers who may be effectively using a practice that other teachers are looking to develop can offer them assistance.
Individual professional performance plans reviewed annually	Individual, group and whole school professional performance milestones are reported on and professional learning plans are reviewed and renewed each term.

<sup>13</sup> Source: Cole (2005)

The practices listed in the right-hand side of Boxes 2 and 3 characterise a school in which professional learning is being managed by the school to meet the improvement needs of the school. The practices in the left-hand column of Boxes 2 and 3 characterise a school in which the professional learning is instigated by the teacher and reacted to by the school. In this latter case, professional learning may not be serving the improvement needs of the school. This is because the school is likely to have pockets of good practice, pockets of adequate practice and pockets of less than adequate practice.

The professional learning practices described on the right hand side of Boxes 2 and 3 encourage teachers to 'function as members of a community of practitioners who share knowledge and commitments, who work together to create coherent curriculum and systems that support students, and collaborate in ways that advance their combined understanding and skill'<sup>14</sup>.

Such an outcome is desired as effective schools are learning communities where there is a culture of teacher collaboration and collective responsibility for the development of effective teaching practices and improved student learning. Being part of a learning community is not simply about the pursuit of individual learning goals it also is about contributing to the learning and knowledge base of one's colleagues and the school.

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<sup>14</sup> Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005)

## How is a strong professional learning culture developed?

### Key points

- Teaching practice needs to be 'de-privatised' so that a culture of professional sharing, experimentation and critique can flourish in schools.
- Without a strong professional learning culture the potential benefits from engagement in professional learning will be dissipated.
- There are numerous strategies that schools can adopt to strengthen staff interaction and trust and build a strong professional learning culture.

There are many taken-for-granted practices in schools that work against schools becoming places where 'every teacher engages in professional learning every day so every student achieves'<sup>15</sup>.

One of the biggest challenges on the road to establishing the school as a rich environment for teacher learning is to 'de-privatise' the work of teachers and the results of this work. Signs of a privatised mindset about classroom teaching include reluctance by teachers to:

- jointly plan and review work programs,
- adopt common assessment tasks,
- follow agreed classroom protocols and procedures
- allow others to observe them teach
- mentor or coach less experienced colleagues
- make their students' achievements transparent.

Very good teachers can have a 'privatised classroom' mindset. Typically, they work hard at preparing their lessons, run an orderly classroom, develop a good rapport with their students and are effective at supporting their students to achieve high results. The pity about such teachers having a privatised classroom mindset is that they are missing out on opportunities to become even better teachers and they are avoiding situations where they could assist others to become better teachers.

Very poor teachers can also have a privatised classroom mindset. Their students achieve unsatisfactory results possibly because they skimp on lesson preparation and have difficulty managing classroom misbehavior. The pity about these teachers having a privatized classroom is that they are not held accountable for their actions and they are not helped to become better teachers.

In a school where practice is 'de-privatised' teachers consider that it is their professional responsibility to:

- make their practice public
- keep learning and improving their practice
- help colleagues with their professional learning
- collect and share data about the performance of their students so that student, teacher and school performance is transparent
- be concerned about the learning and wellbeing of all students in their school, not just those in their classes

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<sup>15</sup> National Staff Development Council (undated)

- set school, teacher and student improvement goals and targets
- adopt a collective responsibility for improving student learning outcomes.

In a school where practice is de-privatised', classroom teaching observation and feedback is commonplace; professional learning planning is focused, pragmatic and shared; professional learning opportunities are structured into the day-to-day operations and routines of the school; and a culture of professional sharing, experimentation and critique has become the norm. Unfortunately, many schools have not established such practices and still function in many ways that are consistent with a 'privatised classroom' sensibility.

So whilst it is easy to assert that teacher facilitated and school-located professional learning focused on classroom practice is most likely to improve classroom teaching<sup>16</sup>, opportunities for this kind of professional learning may not be all that common in many schools. Some evidence to support this statement is provided by a 2003 survey<sup>17</sup> that revealed that only 3-4% of the professional development activities experienced by teachers involved classroom demonstration and only 2-4% involved peer observation and feedback. Indeed, it is likely that few teachers currently would agree that their school and colleagues present as the most effective sources for meeting their professional learning needs. Box 4 suggests some reasons why this might be so.

Box 4: Factors that impede school-based professional learning<sup>18</sup>

Most teachers:

- are reluctant to volunteer to mentor or coach colleagues
- are reluctant to demonstrate good practice
- are reluctant to ask colleagues for assistance or feedback
- are reluctant to have others observe them teach
- are reluctant to observe others teach and provide them with feedback
- do not see it as their role to contribute to the training/learning of other colleagues
- do not have the time to participate in or contribute to teacher facilitated training.

Nevertheless, these factors are not insurmountable and provide an initial list of the areas that could be worked on to make school workplaces rich with opportunities for professional learning and where professional learning arises from and feeds back into daily experience. A school with such a workplace could be described as having a strong professional learning culture.

A professional learning culture is most likely to develop when there is a high degree of leadership support<sup>19</sup> for teacher learning and risk taking and when there is a high degree of staff interaction and co-dependence. Consequently strategies designed to produce these

<sup>16</sup> It is acknowledged that a teacher in a very small school is more likely to benefit from external input and participation in networks as their teaching environment is unlikely to provide adequate opportunities for meeting their professional learning needs.

<sup>17</sup> Owen (2003)

<sup>18</sup> Source: Cole (2005)

<sup>19</sup> Leithwood et al (2004)

conditions need to be implemented. A few of the typical strategies adopted by schools to build collegiality, trust and cooperation between staff are listed in Box 5 below. The first four strategies are designed to increase teacher dialogue about teaching and learning and encourage co-dependence. The latter ‘softer’ strategy, however, is equally important as teacher trust and risk-taking is more likely to be evident when individuals feel they have the friendship and loyalty of their colleagues as well as their professional respect.

*Box 5: Strategies for building staff interaction and cooperation<sup>20</sup>*

Team planning	working with colleagues to jointly plan a syllabus, a unit of work, a lesson or an activity within a lesson, homework tasks, extra-curricular activities, parent meetings, and so forth
Learning teams	teachers who agree to work together to explore teaching and learning issues and strategies and share teaching experiences
Teaching teams	teachers who take responsibility for teaching a common group of students (e.g. students in Year 6 or 9) and cooperate in the planning and delivery of lessons to the student group
Team teaching	teachers who occupy the same classroom space (usually occupied by a class formed by consolidating two or more ‘regular’ classes) and share in the running of the consolidated classroom
Mentoring	establishing a formal relationship whereby a highly competent and experienced teacher supports a less experienced and competent teacher through the offering of advice and feedback.
Social gatherings	any informal but planned activities that enable staff to relate within a social context – weekly social club, weekend retreats, staff dinners, staff sports teams, trivia nights, theatre nights, etc.

These strategies and other ones such as action research groups and professional reading and discussion groups provide the foundation for building a strong professional learning culture.

A further layer of strategies that are likely to result in an examination of and feedback on one’s actual classroom teaching effectiveness build on the previous strategies and contribute to the development of a strong professional learning culture. These are outlined in Box 6 below.

*Box 6: Strategies that contribute to a strong professional learning culture<sup>21</sup>*

Coaching:	the coach is responsible for participating in regular discussion sessions with the teacher and for suggesting strategies designed to improve their performance.
Mentoring:	a mentor is a more experienced person who supports and assists another person to grow and learn in their role

<sup>20</sup> Source: Cole (2005)

<sup>21</sup> Source: Cole (2005)

Teacher observation:	in-class observation of a specified element of teaching and the provision of feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching performance.
Teaching demonstration:	provision of a 'model' lesson with a prior discussion to clarify purpose, expectations and desired outcomes and a debriefing session to review the lesson and its outcomes.
Walk Throughs:	instructionally-focused Walk Throughs use observers who visit numerous classrooms for short periods of time to observe how a particular practice is being implemented and pool their individual observations to provide the leadership team with a report.
Lesson study:	this strategy originated in Japan and is a structured method of planning, teaching, reviewing and redesigning a lesson to make it as effective as possible.
Inter-school pairing	this strategy involves one teacher working alongside a teacher in another school for a day a week for several weeks and then swapping the arrangement around and debriefing on the experience.

Schools committed to the development of a strong professional culture have looked across the school for opportunities to change arrangements so that increased opportunities are provided for teachers to reflect on their practice and learn from each other. This has resulted in changes in the use of facilities, the way that professional learning resources are allocated, the management of professional learning, the school's professional learning policy and the time available for professional learning.

Examples of various strategies adopted by schools to strengthen their professional learning culture are listed in Box 7.

*Box 7: School actions that contribute to a strong professional learning culture<sup>22</sup>*

Facilities strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establishing a lesson demonstration area (e.g. a modified classroom with an adjacent viewing room)</li> <li>• establishing a workshop presentation area</li> <li>• establishing small group meeting rooms</li> <li>• providing teaching teams and their student group a dedicated area for their classes.</li> </ul>
Resourcing strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using professional learning funds for in-school teacher release</li> <li>• maintaining a well-stocked and up to date professional reading and viewing library</li> <li>• supporting groups, rather than an individual, to attend professional network meetings and external training events</li> <li>• engaging classroom coaches and demonstration teachers to work directly with teachers in their classrooms.</li> </ul>

<sup>22</sup> Source: Cole (2005)



Professional learning management strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lifting the status of the school's professional learning coordinator by allocating this role to a leader of significance within the school and including them in the school's leadership team</li> <li>• building professional learning plans around a series of short-term classroom focused activities and targets that are reviewed regularly</li> <li>• making all teachers' professional learning targets public</li> <li>• building the expectation that teachers with similar professional learning targets will work together to develop and share their knowledge and skills</li> <li>• building the expectation that teachers will give timely reports on their professional learning progress</li> <li>• building the expectation that collaborative teacher activities will produce artefacts (e.g., units of work and rubrics) that other teachers can use to improve teaching and learning</li> <li>• requiring teaching teams and learning teams to set and review progress towards improvement goals</li> <li>• focusing on getting pockets of good practice spread across the school</li> <li>• developing a professional learning policy that reflects a commitment to the maintenance of a strong professional learning culture (see Appendix 1 for a sample policy).</li> </ul>
Structural strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allocating teaching duties in ways that result in a defined team of teachers taking responsibility for a common group of students (e.g. a Year 7 or Year 9 teaching team)</li> <li>• timetabling to create blocks of free time for teachers to work together</li> <li>• reallocating meeting time to professional learning time</li> <li>• establishing a regular regime of staff led professional learning events</li> <li>• establishing processes to enable external professional learning experiences to feed into school-wide improvement planning (e.g. by establishing a task force reliant of input from professional learning investigations)</li> <li>• including in experienced and effective teachers' role descriptions the responsibility for assisting other staff to improve their teaching competence</li> </ul>

Ideally the professional learning culture of the school would be such that teachers would be committed to continually:

- acquiring new knowledge and skills (learning what and how to improve their teaching)
- implementing new practice (applying new knowledge and skills in the classroom)
- refining new practice through self-reflection and feedback (improving implementation)
- sharing new practice through demonstrations, workshops and presentations (teaching others what and how to improve their teaching)
- assisting others to implement improvements through team planning and teaching, coaching and mentoring (spreading the implementation of new knowledge and skills in the classroom)
- refining each other's practice through observation and feedback.

Research<sup>23</sup> suggests that creating a collaborative culture within schools is 'the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives, the first order of business for those seeking to enhance their schools' effectiveness, an essential requirement of improving schools, the critical element in reform efforts, and the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement'.

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<sup>23</sup> DuFour (2001)

It has also been suggested<sup>24</sup> that in a school where there is a rich professional learning culture even flawed professional learning events can serve as a catalyst for professional growth as there are systems to enable the insights from these events to be examined and discussed.

However, in a school context where teachers are not collaborative and used to sharing ideas and experimenting with their teaching practice, even professional learning programs with solid content and powerful training strategies are unlikely to be effective.

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<sup>24</sup> DuFour (1998)

## How can effective professional learning practice be coupled with effective teaching practice?

### Key points

- Effective teaching practice produces effective schools.
- Research is identifying those teaching and learning practices that hold the most promise for improving teacher effectiveness and student learning.
- The professional learning plans of teachers are more likely to produce improved teaching practice when the professional learning practices are school-based and collegiate.
- Professional learning plans should be focused on evidence-based instructional strategies and techniques.
- Shared learning about effective teaching strategies and techniques helps staff to adopt and refine their use of these new approaches.

Advice about professional learning rightly observes that it should be evidence-based and data-driven. The previous discussion has focused on the evidence about the kinds of professional learning processes and strategies that appear to be most effective in promoting a strong professional learning culture in schools and improving teaching practice. That is, it has been concerned about the forms of professional learning.

An equally important concern relates to the content of professional learning. What if we have adopted forms of professional learning that research suggests are effective in promoting improved teaching but the content of the professional learning activity itself is concerned with promoting teaching practices that subsequently prove to be ineffective in improving student engagement and learning? Clearly an evidence base needs to also inform the content of professional learning activities.

An oft repeated joke is that schooling is in very good shape as there are only two questions remaining to be answered: what to teach and how to teach it. A similar joke could be made about professional learning as only one issue remains unresolved and that is how to marry what we know about effective professional learning with what we know about effective teaching.

To address this issue it is becoming more common for schools to not only document their curriculum, but to also document the instructional and classroom management strategies and techniques that research suggests are the most promising for engaging and improving the learning outcomes of students. These are the practices that the school's teachers are committed to implementing.

This development achieves several outcomes. By auditing teaching practice and engaging in discussions about what instructional and student management practices the school should endorse and then codifying these teaching practices, greater clarity is provided for teachers about:

- what constitutes effective teaching practice
- the teaching strategies and techniques that all teachers in the school should be adopting and that should be observed when visiting each other's classrooms
- the teaching strategies and techniques that the school's professional learning resources should primarily be dedicated towards improving
- teaching strategies and techniques that should be given priority when developing professional learning plans of individual teachers, teaching teams and the school.

One of the reasons for the poor linkage between professional learning and changed classroom practice is that often professional learning intentions, as documented in teachers' professional learning plans, are described in generic terms – such as, to improve boys' learning or to become better at promoting cooperative learning. The more generic the description of a teacher's professional learning need the greater the likelihood that the teacher will have difficulty identifying what to focus on first and what professional learning activities they should participate in. However, this problem is significantly lessened if the teacher's learning intention is described with more precision by wherever possible identifying a particular teaching strategy they wish to implement or a particular teaching technique they wish to master. Teaching strategies and techniques which can relate to classroom instruction or classroom management are sub-sets of teaching practice

The difference between a teaching strategy and teaching technique is that a strategy is a generalised approach to problems and a way to inform decisions; whereas a technique is something you do or say in a particular way. And because a technique is an action, the more it is practiced the better the teacher gets at performing it. By focusing on concrete actions that generally can be understood and implemented in a relatively short period, and then improved over time, teaching capacity is built step by step and the armoury of strategies and techniques available to the teacher is extended.

Individual and group professional learning plans become highly effective tools for promoting teacher collaboration and classroom improvement when they are practical, action oriented and contain specific 'bite sized' learning tasks that are to be completed within a 10 week timeframe. Such a professional learning plan would include the one or two research-based teaching practices that the teacher wishes to acquire or refine; the research-based professional learning strategies that the teacher plans to use to enable them understand the teaching strategy or technique and how to apply it; and the timeline within which the new practice will become part of the teacher's classroom instruction. The adoption of a 'bite-sized' learning task means that it is not too time consuming to learn and not too daunting to implement in one's classroom. It also means that professional learning plans can be regularly renewed as learning tasks are translated in classroom practice. In this way, teacher improvement is a continuous process of accumulating expertise in evidence-based instructional and student management strategies and techniques.

When determining the teaching strategies and techniques that the school will adopt as its preferred set of teaching practices, schools have turned to the advice provided by education departments and to the growing number of books on effective teaching that have moved beyond describing what an effective teacher does to describing how to implement effective practices. Robert Marzano and Doug Lemov are among the most prominent in the current collection of authors<sup>25</sup> who have been successful in extracting from numerous research studies those teaching practices that are most effective in promoting student achievement.

Marzano nominates nine general instructional categories and 34 specific behaviours and organises these strategies into a framework of effective instructional design and Lemov nominates forty-nine 'essential techniques' which can be mastered one at a time and which operate in synergy to produce exceptional teaching. Many schools are using these

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Cleveland (2011), Cole (2008), Hattie (2008), Lemov (2010), Lewis (2011), Linan-Thompson and Vaughn (2007), Marzano (2001, 2003 and 2007), Marzano et al (2005), Munro (2002) Petty (2009), Rogers (2011) and Tomlinson (2001)

evidence-based, micro-teaching teaching strategies and techniques as the content for their professional learning plans.

Teachers in these schools are assuming greater control of their own professional learning by focusing on a couple of teaching strategies and techniques at a time and conducting teacher led professional learning activities that introduce and then help to improve the application of these practices in classrooms across the school. These strategies and techniques are also what teachers look for when conducting instructional walk-throughs and classroom observations.

By doing this, schools are successfully linking effective professional learning practices with effective teaching practices and thereby optimising the effectiveness of their professional learning.

## Conclusion

An oft referred to rule of thumb about professional learning is that the further away from the school and the larger the professional learning event, the less likely that it will have an impact on the school. Whilst this is generally the case, it is also the case that if an individual is seeking to increase their knowledge about the topic being presented or to be stimulated by new educational ideas, then a conference could well serve that purpose.

Three additional rules of thumb to guide professional practice are that:

- there are many options for acquiring education knowledge but relatively few for learning how to implement a teaching strategy or master a teaching technique
- learning how to implement a teaching strategy or master a teaching technique is best done when it is managed by the school and involves one's colleagues
- learning how to implement a teaching strategy or master a teaching technique is best done when the learning task is concrete, specific and able to be completed in a relatively short period of time.

The *National Professional Standards for Teachers* contains thirty-seven illustrations of the knowledge, practice and professional engagement that characterise a highly accomplished teacher. A selection of these statements has been provided in Box 8.

### *Box 8: Characteristics of highly accomplished teachers*

Highly accomplished teachers:

- select from a flexible and effective repertoire of teaching strategies to suit the physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students (Professional Knowledge – Standard 1)
- support colleagues to plan and implement learning and teaching programs using contemporary knowledge and understanding of curriculum, assessment and reporting requirements (Professional Knowledge – Standard 2)
- model and share with colleagues a flexible repertoire of strategies for classroom management to ensure all students are engaged in purposeful activities (Professional Practice – Standard 3)
- develop and share with colleagues a flexible repertoire of behaviour management strategies using expert knowledge and workplace experience (Professional Practice – Standard 4)
- work with colleagues to use data from internal and external student assessments for evaluating learning and teaching, identifying interventions and modifying teaching practice (Professional Practice – Standard 5)
- plan for professional learning by accessing and critiquing relevant research, engage in high quality targeted opportunities to improve practice and offer quality placements for pre-service teachers where applicable (Professional Engagement – Standard 6)

What is most apparent about the qualities of highly accomplished teachers is not just that they have high levels of personal teaching competence but they also have the capacity and willingness to work effectively with their colleagues to improve the teaching practice across the school.

The professional learning practices discussed in the previous sections reflect this understanding of what a highly accomplished teacher does. A school's professional learning strategy it must not only contribute to the development of leadership and teaching competence but also contribute to building a teacher workforce that is collegiate and

continually striving to become more effective so that teaching and learning across the whole school is improved.

Whilst individual teachers can and need to manage aspects their own professional growth through reading, sharing ideas with colleagues, attending conferences, undertaking further study and being actively involved in professional networks, the nature of schools also requires that teachers work collaboratively to establish effective learning environments and develop consistency in the quality of their teaching. School-based professional learning helps to meet this requirement.

However, just because professional learning is school based and school managed does not necessarily guarantee that it will impact on teaching practice in ways that produce school improvement. If schools simply replicate the information-giving sessions typically provided at conferences, require all teachers to attend regardless of their learning need, and use presenters with less expertise than the presenters used by external professional learning providers they are likely to provoke teacher resentment and gain very little benefit. School based and school managed professional learning needs to be constructed around what we know about effective professional learning practices and effective teaching practices. The challenge of marrying effective school-based professional learning with effective teaching practice is addressed in this paper.

Teachers in a number of schools have committed to implementing specific, evidence -based teaching behaviours and techniques across the school and are sharing the responsibility for researching, trialling, demonstrating and then providing training in particular techniques. Teachers implementing particular strategies and 'micro-teaching' techniques have their learning reinforced by coaching and mentoring, working in small teams, lesson demonstrations and receiving feedback following classroom observations. When a particular set of the techniques have become a permanent part of most teachers' repertoire of teaching practices this is acknowledged and celebrated.

These school-based professional learning approaches are supplemented by school-managed professional learning that supports teachers to attend network, region and state-wide professional learning events in order to share their experience, learn from other teachers and teaching experts and bring new suggestions for improving school and teacher practice back into the school. By being clear about their professional learning objectives and well organised in the roll-out of their professional learning strategy these schools are experiencing increased feelings of teacher efficacy, increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

It has been said<sup>26</sup> that 'the major challenge in improving teaching lies not so much in identifying and describing quality teaching, but in developing structures and approaches that ensure widespread use of successful teaching practices: to make best practice, common practice'. By describing professional learning approaches that work, this guide for teachers and leaders offers a contribution towards meeting this challenge.

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<sup>26</sup> Dinham, et al (2008)

## **Appendix 1: Suggested elements of a school's Professional Learning Policy**

Statements that might be incorporated into the professional learning policy of the school are that:

- all staff will actively support their colleagues to improve their teaching
- all staff will have a personal professional learning plan
- professional learning plans will be based on changes to practice that staff wish to initiate or refine
- professional learning plan targets will be communicated to one's colleagues
- wherever possible staff with similar professional learning targets will work together and support each other to achieve their target
- professional learning plans will be reviewed each semester – this could be a professional learning team group review of each other's plans, a peer review or a review by a senior staff member
- wherever possible professional learning will be school located
- professional learning could be commissioned as a means for finding out more about an issue/teaching approach (e.g. a team may be commissioned to visit an exemplary school, to research a particular topic or attend a conference)
- professional learning activities beyond the school will be used as a means of extending networks and introducing new approaches to the school
- professional learning funds will be used to release teachers to undertake professional learning experiences within the school
- the school will organise so that time is available for professional learning activities to be sustained
- wherever possible, attendance at an external professional learning activity will involve a minimum of three staff who will be responsible for reporting back on the activity and its implications for school practice
- all beginning teachers and teachers new to the school will be provided with a mentor
- the strength of the school's professional learning culture will be reviewed annually
- staff performance reviews will focus on what happens in the classroom and what the teacher is doing to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

A process for developing a school's professional learning policy is to pose possible statements to be included in the policy as questions and seek staff responses (e.g. 'yes', 'no opinion' and 'no') to the questions via a survey entitled Staff Beliefs about Professional Learning. For example, the first few questions could be:

- Should staff actively support each other to improve their teaching?
- Should all staff have a personal professional learning plan?
- Should professional learning plans be based primarily on promoting improved classroom teaching?



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