

Lifelong Learners:  
**How Redefining Professional  
Learning Leads to Stronger  
Teachers and Improved  
Student Outcomes**



**EDUCATORS**  
for High Standards



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# INTRODUCTION

Effective teaching is the most influential factor in improving student achievement.<sup>1</sup> One of the best ways to ensure students are taught by effective educators is by providing high-quality professional learning that helps teachers continuously improve and perfect their craft to meet the needs of their students. For years, states and districts have recognized the value of providing professional learning to their teachers, often offering and requiring participation in a variety of sessions or courses. Despite this effort, educators consistently report that these experiences provided little value and failed to impact their instruction.

In far too many schools and districts, professional learning offerings are delivered in infrequent, stand-alone sessions or workshops that do not allow the time needed for teachers to practice and master strategies in their classroom.<sup>2</sup> These experiences are primarily composed of “sit and get” exercises designed to meet district requirements, often focusing on what educators describe as the “one hit wonder strategy of the time,” that lack opportunities for educators to gain a deep understanding of strategies and receive feedback on their progress along the way. Consequently, most districts are unable to illustrate a direct impact of professional learning on either instruction or student learning. In 2015, a study conducted by The New Teacher Project found that less than half of the educators surveyed felt that professional learning led to lasting improvements in their instruction.<sup>3</sup>

But this doesn't have to be the case. In spring 2017, Educators for High Standards partnered with Learning Forward and Teach Plus, two of the leading educator advocacy organizations in the country, with the shared goal of highlighting and showcasing educators who are leading high-quality, redefined professional learning in their own schools or districts. We spent the summer talking with six educators from five states implementing innovative, redefined professional learning to better understand how they are designing and implementing learning experiences, and how it is impacting students and educators.

What we learned was not only instructive — showing how teachers crave high-quality, collaborative, teacher-led professional learning opportunities and are eager to implement new strategies in their classrooms — but also illustrated the importance of strong professional learning in the future of the teaching profession. Candace Hines, a Kindergarten teacher in Tennessee, captured just how rewarding it can be for teachers to stay in the classroom while taking on a role in teacher-led professional learning: “Teaching is at the heart of everything that I do. Having the experience with being a teacher leader, though, has unlocked a new passion within me. And I've found that helping other teachers in their profession is very rewarding. And I just sat back one day and I did the math. So in my own classroom you have 20 to 25 students that you will help and that you will have a direct impact on. But as I began facilitating adult learning sessions and professional learning... I noticed that my impact was able to help other teachers. And if you do the math, think about all those different classrooms that you're touching. So for me that's a very rewarding experience. I'm humbled by it. I appreciate it. And I love it.”



“When I've gone to a professional development that isn't teacher-led or is just these one-off workshops, as they have been in the past, I haven't been really motivated to actually try things, because I feel like if a consultant who hasn't been in the classroom for 15 years is telling me what to do, why should I listen to that person?”

— Lindsey Horowitz

- 1 Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Students Achievement, RAND Corporation, 2012, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate\\_pubs/CP693z1-2012-09.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CP693z1-2012-09.html)
- 2 Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work, Learning Forward, 2016, 2 <https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/teacheragencyfinal.pdf>
- 3 The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth about our Quest for Teacher Development, TNTP, 2011, [https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage\\_2015.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage_2015.pdf)

# THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT: AN OPPORTUNITY

While it's always important to understand how professional learning impacts educators and the classroom, the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 presents a unique opportunity for states and districts to ensure every teacher has access to high-quality, effective professional learning that impacts instruction and student learning. The law created a new definition of professional learning, identifying it as "activities that are sustained, intensive, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom focused." In order to ensure states fully leverage this opportunity, state and district leaders must have a clear understanding of how to design aligned professional learning and clear guidance on how to implement it.

Although the process of designing and implementing high-quality professional learning isn't easy, there are also several external threats that could limit ESSA's impact on professional learning. President Trump's 2018 proposed budget called for massive cuts to the U.S. Department of Education, including the elimination of \$2.25 billion in funding for Title II Part A, known as the "Supporting Effective Instruction State Grant Program." These funds are granted to states to support, train, and retain educators, which allows for significant flexibility in how the funds are used. But more than half of all districts use this funding on professional learning for educators. Decreasing Title II Part A funding will force states to think outside the box, and to find innovative ways to use the limited resources and personnel to provide educators with high-quality redefined professional learning — tasks that many states and districts have proven they are ill-equipped to successfully implement. Funding concerns aside, state and local education agencies will need time to plan as well as guidance to implement professional learning that is truly aligned if they hope to improve the quality of instruction and learning in their schools.

Although states are facing clear obstacles, the good news is that countless educators across the country are already leading and implementing well-designed, impactful professional learning with great results. Regardless of any hurdles, school and district leaders can and should be looking to their own educators to implement improved professional learning. Despite uncertain funding, it is possible to provide teachers with the support they need to continuously improve and meet the needs of an ever-changing student population, particularly when schools and districts empower educators to lead.

# THE COMPONENTS OF REDEFINED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

**ESSA requires that professional learning meets four specific criteria, which are strongly aligned to Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning<sup>4,5</sup>:**

## ▶ Classroom-Focused

For professional learning to have an impact on student learning and instruction, it should center on what guides instruction in the classroom, including the state academic standards and content-based curriculum. Classroom-focused learning also takes into account the students in the classroom — their age, ability level, and learning styles, and the types of activities and support they need to be successful.

## ▶ Sustained

The only way professional learning can lead to improved student outcomes is when it is sustained over a period of time. Sustained learning allows educators to practice and modify strategies and seek coaching and feedback, until they have mastered implementation in their classroom.

## ▶ Job-Embedded

Effective professional learning should be integrated regularly in an educator’s schedule. It should foster ongoing communication and collaboration among teachers and address the specific needs of a school’s student population.

## ▶ Data-Driven

Lack of support for Title II Part A comes from the lack of data to illustrate its impact. It is important to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data as evidence that professional learning is improving student outcomes and instruction, and continues to meet the needs of educators.

**ESSA also encourages a commitment to another characteristic, which is especially important:**

## Teacher-Led

In addition to the components outlined by ESSA, there is strong consensus among teacher advocates that it is equally important that professional learning is teacher-led when possible. ESSA does not mandate this, but does make mention of it: [Professional development] “may include activities that... are developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, other school leaders...”.

4 Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Forward, 2015, <https://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning>

5 The Every Student Succeeds Act, the 114th Congress, 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf>

# REDEFINED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN ACTION

**Our partnership with Teach Plus and Learning Forward provided an opportunity for us to learn more from educators in California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Tennessee, who highlighted how they are implementing redefined professional learning in their districts. While each works in a unique context with different student populations, they all discussed their professional learning experiences in ways that illustrate the various components of ESSA's definition.**

## Classroom-Focused

Classroom-focused professional learning deepens educators' content knowledge and understanding of how students learn and master skills and concepts. We heard multiple times that although many states have transitioned to higher standards, there is still a great demand for educators to better understand how to create challenging lesson plans aligned to the standards. Classroom-focused learning requires educators to learn and master strategies and practices they should implement in their classrooms on a regular basis.

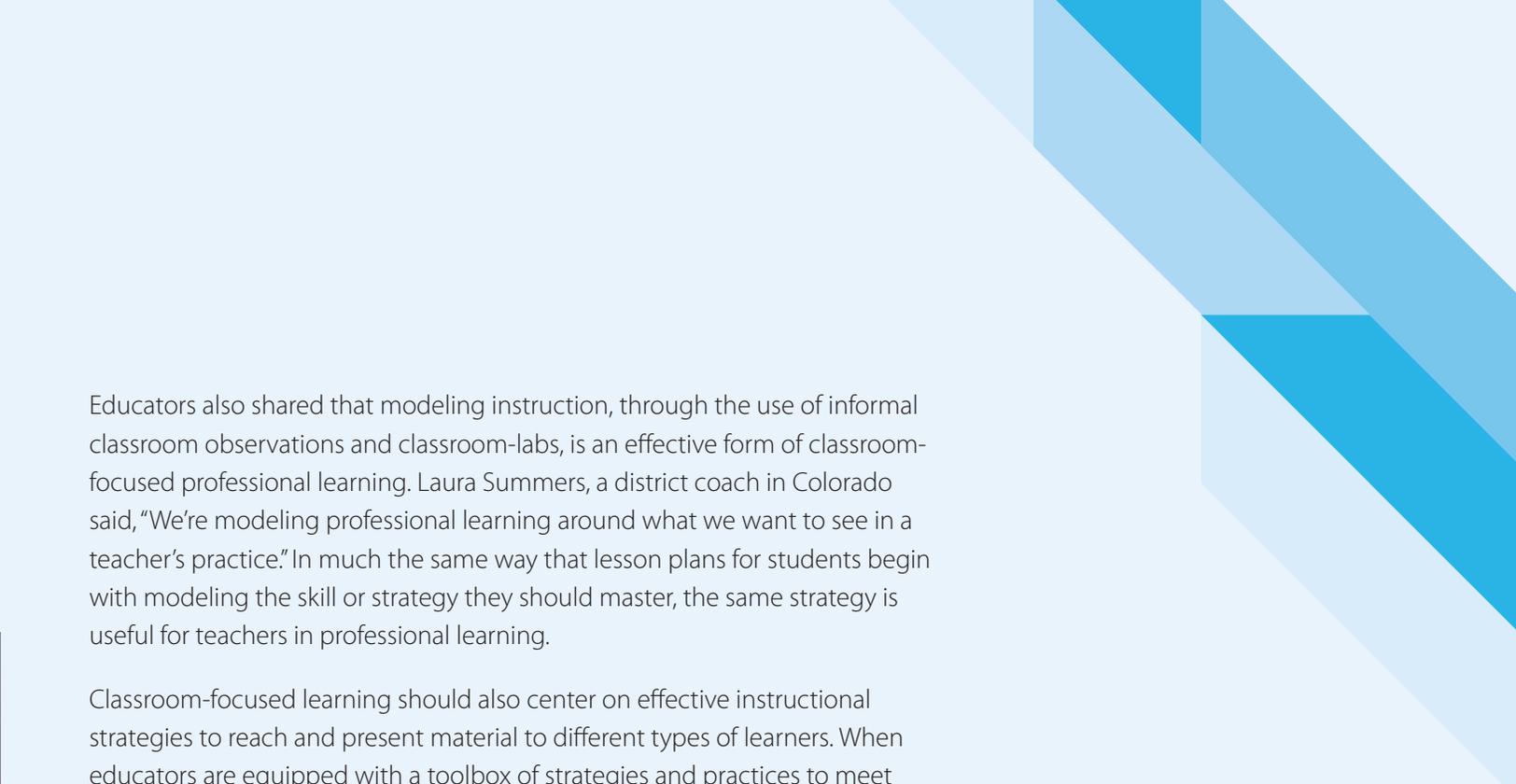
Amanda Hathaway, a veteran Boston Public Schools teacher of more than 10 years, emphasized the importance of constantly improving through professional learning. She noted, "There's always something for teachers to be working on to improve their work in the classroom. And every time a teacher learns a new strategy or addresses content in a new way, or connects with students in a different way, he or she changes the learning for the students in that classroom. Giving teachers the opportunity to develop their craft, to collaborate with other teachers, to take a sustained approach to improving their classrooms, is really key to the learners that we want to develop across the nation."

Amanda discussed a math course she leads, which is designed to help middle and high school math teachers get their students talking and reasoning about math problems and sharing their thinking. In this intense six-session course, Amanda supports teachers as they design a series of lessons that position students as the "meaning makers" in a classroom, ultimately giving them a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts — a cornerstone of the state's high academic standards. The teachers become masters at facilitating higher level thinking through the extended and intense exposure in the professional learning opportunity that Amanda provides.



"I'm just looking for more opportunities to learn more so that I can roll that over to benefit our students."

— Candace Hines



Educators also shared that modeling instruction, through the use of informal classroom observations and classroom-labs, is an effective form of classroom-focused professional learning. Laura Summers, a district coach in Colorado said, “We’re modeling professional learning around what we want to see in a teacher’s practice.” In much the same way that lesson plans for students begin with modeling the skill or strategy they should master, the same strategy is useful for teachers in professional learning.

Classroom-focused learning should also center on effective instructional strategies to reach and present material to different types of learners. When educators are equipped with a toolbox of strategies and practices to meet the needs of multiple learning styles, they can more effectively reach all students. Building a deep well of instructional strategies can impact multiple grade levels and content areas, which is beneficial for students and teachers. For example, Lindsey Horowitz, a Language Arts teacher in Massachusetts, facilitates professional learning on informational text comprehension strategies, which is used by educators in all content areas in her school.

In addition to the standards-focused instruction Amanda Hathaway facilitates, she also works to help her colleagues understand the importance of student-centered lesson planning. She helps them consider questions like “What prerequisite skills will my students need, and do they have them?” and “Will they work alone or in pairs?” before planning a lesson. Because this type of professional learning results in materials and strategies educators can easily use in their classroom, they are more likely to implement them immediately, and to continue them over time.

“It’s really easy to get into the routine of always teaching the same thing. I teach the same books every year and I think it would be easier for me to just always do the same activities with every book, or use the same materials. But when I go to professional development and I actually hear about what other teachers are doing, and I have good professional development that allows me to collaborate and really apply what I’m learning to my classroom, my lessons get that much stronger and my students get that much more engaged.”

— Lindsey Horowitz

## Sustained

Educators have historically lamented that stand-alone professional learning does not meet their needs, and the sentiment of our interviewees was no different. When asked about previous professional learning experiences, all grudgingly referenced the traditional “sit and get” opportunities, many of which focused on strategies they were unable to successfully integrate into their instruction, because there was no ongoing support to do so. Many educators also made mention of one-off workshops, which taught valuable strategies but lacked opportunities for teachers to practice and refine them, resulting in many failed attempts at implementation. “When I first started teaching, professional development was very standalone... and that one time was supposed to work miracles,” said Laura Summers. Every teacher praised ESSA’s definition of professional learning for its emphasis on sustained activities, which will provide teachers the time and feedback they need to master strategies.

Several educators felt this component of redefined learning was the most exciting. Candace Hines explains: “To me, it’s important to not just... sit through one and be one and done, so to speak... [instead it’s helpful to follow] up on the work that you do, to actually make sure that what you’re learning and what you’re implementing is effective.”

Educators gave a variety of examples of how they provide sustained and ongoing support. Some of the most common types of support were:

- ▶ Formal regular meetings with peers, often through professional learning communities or PLCs;
- ▶ Feedback from formative classroom observations to help inform and guide coaching for improvement; and
- ▶ Informal meetings, such as virtual online communities and discussion forums to continuously learn from and with peers.

Educators consistently emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for formative assessment and feedback when designing professional learning. They shared the belief that having an opportunity to practice instruction, receive actionable feedback from peers, and master strategies, with ongoing support as needed, is the linchpin in a well-designed professional learning system.



“So often when we try a new strategy in the classroom, it fails the first time, and a lot of times as a teacher, we’ll abandon that approach. But most things that we try in life for the first time, we should be failing at. And that’s how we learn and that’s how we figure out what’s going to work in the classroom.”

— **Amanda Hathaway**

6 The State of Teacher Learning, Learning Forward, 2017, [https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/professional\\_learning\\_teacher\\_survey\\_2017.pdf](https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/professional_learning_teacher_survey_2017.pdf)

## Job-Embedded

Professional learning should be embedded into an educator's regular schedule, which can be done in a variety of ways. Yet, only 25 percent of teachers report this type of learning taking place in their schools. One popular way of embedding professional learning is through PLCs. These groups of educators are granted dedicated time during the school day to meet, discuss progress, score student assessments, reflect on observations and coach each other.

Educators praise job-embedded learning for the multiple benefits it offers — chief among them the ways in which it increases collaboration among teachers. Hope Black, an Assistant Principal in Georgia, described the learning that she leads in her school. At the heart of it, she explains it as, “a place where you can go and talk about what’s working and what’s not, and devise a plan to meet the needs of your students.” Granting educators time in their schedules to collaborate on new strategies or deliver content in a new way reduces the sense of isolation many feel, and also provides opportunities to share best practices to increase student learning outcomes.

Laura Summers also leads the Opportunity Gap Cohort in her district in Colorado, in which teachers and leaders gather regularly around a problem of practice. Sessions are co-facilitated by experts within the district, and participants share, model, and discuss strategies to improve the performance of historically underserved and at-risk students. These strategies are then implemented at the school level and are evaluated and refined in subsequent sessions. Because this professional learning is built into the culture of the district and the schedules of participants, it not only creates opportunities for educators to work together and share best practices, but also gives them time and space to practice and receive feedback on effective teaching strategies.

## Data-Driven

There are two types of data critical to high-quality effective professional learning, both of which have different yet equally important purposes:

1. Qualitative and quantitative data collected from educators to illustrate the impact of professional learning **on their professional growth**; and
2. Qualitative and quantitative student data to illustrate the impact of professional learning **on student outcomes**.

The first type of data seems to be much more widely and easily collected. Educators consistently discussed at length their process for receiving formative feedback on the professional learning they facilitated and how they used it to reflect and improve their future sessions or courses. This type of data helps facilitators ensure they are meeting the needs of participants, and can be used to improve the quality of professional learning.



“What is the point of professional learning if it’s not going to lead to greater student outcomes?”

— Laura Summers

Candace Hines surveys each teacher that takes her course and analyzes the data to reveal the most effective content, and what may need to be changed or improved. This type of continuous improvement is second nature to teachers, as they are constantly assessing and adjusting instruction in their classrooms.

Collecting data on student outcomes has traditionally been a much less common practice, but one that is beginning to become more prevalent. One example is Learning Forward's Redesign PD Community of Practice. An 18-month program with a deep focus on helping educators measure the shifts in their instruction and knowledge through the use of performance management tools, this community also supports them in analyzing student work to evaluate the impact of their own learning on student outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Qualitative data, including educator observations, recordings of lessons, and reports on student engagement, is valuable, as we heard many teachers discuss. But it is even more important for educators to understand the importance of and collect quantitative data, which can and should go beyond assessment data. Laura Summers stressed the importance of a "measurement cycle," in which educators gather data and reflect on it to make decisions about instruction moving forward. In Laura's district, educators and administrators gather student input by meeting with students to learn how they use similar strategies across multiple classrooms to see how teacher professional learning permeates student experiences. Many of our educators emphasized the power of combining both student data with anecdotal feedback to get a more holistic picture of the effectiveness and quality of professional learning.

A great (and simple) example also shared by Amanda Hathaway was her collection of pre and post student work. She participated in professional learning to help her better instruct students on how to write math reflections and demonstrate their conceptual understanding. As she introduced and perfected the strategy, she documented their growth through a rubric, which showed how students were increasingly able to explain complex mathematical concepts — a direct result of the strategy. Student impact data serves as evidence of the importance and impact of professional learning for both teachers and students, but it can also be used to understand what strategies educators have learned and are implementing effectively and where they need additional support. "I think that teachers can use data to push districts and administrators to bring in high quality professional learning opportunities. If a teacher is trying out a new strategy, and is looking at student work, and notices, 'Hey, this strategy that I've been working on is really increasing what my students are writing [and] how my students are solving problems.' They can use that data to, to push their argument further," Amanda shared with us.

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7 Learning Forward, Redesign PD Community of Practice, 2016, <https://learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/redesign-pd-community-of-practice>

## Teacher-Led

According to Lindsey Horowitz, teacher-led learning is the best way to engage teachers. “Districts spend a lot of money on professional development from consultants... and actually, all the teacher-led professional development has been the best professional development I’ve received. And teachers, for the most part, are really happy to just have the opportunity to share what they’re doing, because it can increase alignment at the school, or it helps other teachers know what’s going on in their classroom, or even, when I lead, I like to get feedback from other teachers about how I could improve. And you don’t necessarily get that when you’re having a consultant.”

When a classroom teacher facilitates professional learning, he or she can give authentic examples of classroom scenarios and specific instructional strategies, which makes the learning experience more meaningful for participants. Lindsey continues: “Professional learning has really impacted my growth as a teacher because I feel like I’ve been really challenged by other teachers. When I’ve gone to a professional development that isn’t teacher-led or is just these one-off workshops, as they have been in the past, I haven’t been really motivated to actually try things, because I feel like if a consultant who hasn’t been in the classroom for 15 years is telling me what to do, why should I listen to that person? But when I’m working with someone who’s always in classrooms, or who’s following up with me, I feel like I actually want to do these things and I’m motivated to challenge myself and try it out. And then in addition, because of the collaborative nature of the professional development, I feel like I can bounce ideas off of people.” She goes on to say, “So, I’ll try a fishbowl discussion and then if it goes well, that’s great, but if it doesn’t go well, I have all these other people in my professional development with whom I can discuss and say, ‘What suggestions do you have to make this better?’” In short, classroom educators leading professional learning are perceived as more credible sources of knowledge, and when they are well-trained, these teacher-leaders have far more potential to impact their peers.

Supporting educators who facilitate professional learning leads to the development of content and pedagogy experts at the district and school level, and allows educators to “lead from the classroom” instead of taking on separate roles supporting their colleagues. Every educator we interviewed explained that when teachers develop, lead, and facilitate professional learning, it increases their confidence. Sara Slowbe, a teacher in California, comments: “Not only am I learning how to best serve my own specific students, but I have been able to develop myself as a leader.”

Teacher-led learning breaks down the confines of classroom walls and school buildings to share best practices, and, ultimately, gives students a better shot at success. Amanda Hathaway shared how the course she is leading provides teachers the opportunity to collaborate and brainstorm together, which leads to more innovative thinking and troubleshooting in classrooms. Educators view teacher-led professional learning as a two-way street — when they facilitate professional learning they often learn as much from their colleagues as they impart.

# IMPLICATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

**ESSA gives district and school leaders a unique opportunity to improve the quality and impact of professional learning, leading to better classroom instruction and student outcomes. School and district leaders might begin by seeking out and exploring innovative professional learning practices, like those shared by the educators in this report, to observe and understand how they can implement aligned professional learning effectively to impact teacher growth and increase student achievement. In addition, if states are to implement ESSA with fidelity, they must:**

- ▶ Encourage and listen to the voices of educators in advocating at the district and state-level for the learning experiences they want and need. As the primary consumers of professional learning, it is critical that teachers understand their role in demanding better learning opportunities, and advocate for the professional learning they want and need.
- ▶ Leverage the opportunities and pathways for educators to lead high-quality aligned professional learning. As these opportunities become more widespread, more educators will become involved in professional learning, creating a larger evidence base of the positive impact it has on teaching.
- ▶ Equip teachers to collect the type of data that directly demonstrates the impact of specific professional learning on both their instruction and student learning so they can create powerful narratives. Narratives and data are useless if they are not shared broadly. It is imperative that educators create narratives and share evidence to garner legislative support for quality professional learning, which is not an easy feat for many teachers. State leaders must also again, value the voices of educators in their state.
- ▶ Identify and leverage opportunities to illustrate and share personal and powerful educator narratives around the positive impact of professional learning. This is an area where much support is needed for educators, as it is not part of their daily routine. In our interviews with these six exceptional educators, it was evident how eager teachers are to grow in their ability to shape narratives around their own instruction for the benefit of students.

“We should be lifelong learners. This is who we are at heart. So if you cut funding for professional learning, you’re cutting our growth. You’re stunting the growth and achievement of students.”

— Candace Hines

“I would encourage teachers to talk to each other about high-quality professional learning that they’ve been involved in. To really think through, ‘what are the sessions that I’ve been through that have really impacted my practice in a strong way?’ and share those with other teachers, with administrators, with department heads, with the district, and advocate to bring similar trainings or workshops that are sustained and job-embedded into the school so that all teachers can benefit. Oftentimes teachers will take professional development opportunities on their own, and I think the more that they share and can join as teams of teachers, the more impact it will have on students learning.”

— **Amanda Hathaway**

Our partners Learning Forward and Teach Plus have long provided platforms and resources to help educators advocate for the profession and their own learning. They help educators spread and share their effective practices and strategies. Learning Forward recently published a toolkit to help educators more effectively engage with policymakers. Teach Plus empowers educators to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect student success, including professional learning. Teach Plus’ Teacher-Led Professional Learning Program is aimed at recruiting and training teacher leaders to facilitate professional learning for their peers on key topics to support student learning and achievement.

The educators in this report have demonstrated that designing and implementing high-quality professional learning that improves instruction and student outcomes is possible, and it is taking place already in schools across the country. Regardless of the uncertain future of federal funding, states, districts, and schools must truly rethink the professional learning

they provide and seek out innovative teacher-led opportunities that align to ESSA’s definition. Failing to fully leverage this opportunity means leaving teachers without the support they need to continuously improve their instruction and meet the needs of their students. The status quo won’t cut it any more. Hope Black said it best: “Students only get better as our teachers get better.”

Like other professionals, educators unquestionably need and deserve ongoing opportunities to improve, which clearly serves the “consumers” they reach everyday — students. In the past decade, states have raised academic standards, and Congress has enacted legislation to bring communities together to envision successful schools for students. Now states and districts must commit to redefining professional learning as classroom-focused, sustained, job-embedded, data-driven, and teacher-led, because student success depends on it.

**Thank you** to our partners in this work, Teach Plus and Learning Forward. They were instrumental in identifying these exceptional educators and are at the forefront of making high-quality professional learning a top priority for educators and policymakers. We are especially grateful to our educators Hope Black, Candace Hines, Amanda Hathaway, Lindsey Horowitz, Sara Slowbe and Dr. Laura Summers, who tirelessly put students first in all of their professional endeavors.

