



The keys to effective professional learning: Flexibility and personalization

Over the last few decades, technology and data have become central in education, and teachers have had to develop expertise in both to support their students effectively. At NWEA®, our daily work with teachers has shown us that adapting to meet these additional responsibilities leaves less time for professional learning—despite the need being more pressing than ever.

While the day-long, in-service model is disappearing, teachers still need professional learning, especially courses that focus on how assessment data can support their classroom practices and instructional decisions. Professional learning can evolve to meet their needs by focusing on being flexible and personalized.

Why flexibility matters

There are three main reasons flexibility is essential for delivering meaningful professional learning.

1. Teachers are busy

There simply aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything a teacher aims to accomplish. Piling too-long professional learning sessions on top of already overflowing plates is likely to stoke feelings of resentment, which practically guarantee teachers won't be as receptive at a session and the learning won't stick.

2. Working with data takes time

Setting goals, tracking progress, and making course corrections to improve student learning all take more than a day. Teachers need an entire school year to see the impact of their decisions and discover how assessment data can help them group students, personalize learning, and address knowledge gaps.

3. Learning needs differ based on the time of year

Effective teacher learning opportunities must adapt to the rhythm and requirements of school calendars. For example, goal setting is a key topic during fall and winter but, in the spring, understanding how data can help teachers to prepare for state testing and end-of-year family conferences is timelier.

How we provide flexible learning for teachers

Flexibility means designing professional learning around real-world needs—and providing it in multiple formats.

To keep learning grounded and relevant, we begin by designing each professional learning experience around simple, powerful questions we know teachers are asking. Sometimes those questions are foundational, like, how are my kids doing? Where do I start with reports? Other times, teachers have more specific questions: Are my students on track to meet proficiency goals? How do I use data to inform my instructional decisions?

To meet teachers where they are, our model starts with four different types of engagement so you can select what works best for you.

- **Online and real-time facilitated learning.** These workshops for groups of 10–12 teachers last 90–120 minutes. Participants work with an NWEA expert to explore a topic that's particularly relevant for them. These guided sessions also include exploring specific strategies so teachers can take action in their classroom right away.



- **Online asynchronous learning.** These short, focused e-learning experiences can be taken from any device and at any time. Every lesson is focused on a specific idea or skill.
- **On-site learning.** These sessions are built on the same principles as our virtual options—targeted, guided, and based on answering real-world questions—but they take advantage of larger blocks of time. Sessions can be done in three or six hours, and they can include up to 40 people.
- **Small-team blended learning.** This combination of on-site and online learning experiences is designed for small groups of teachers to learn collaboratively. Each 45–90 minute session focuses on a single instructional application.

The other side of the coin: personalization

For teacher professional learning to be effective, flexibility on its own isn't enough. The content also needs to speak to who individual teachers are and what they're facing in their classroom. Here's why.

1. Every classroom is different

Teachers face a variety of complex challenges that vary widely based on their local context. Teachers need to know what their specific students are ready to learn, what progress they're making on instructional plans, and what defines success.

2. Most people learn best through practical application

Many of us need to make an explicit connection between theory and practical application for learning to stick. Working with local data in real time is more effective for teachers than abstract concepts because they can immediately turn what they've learned into next steps for their classroom.

3. Levels of assessment literacy vary

Just like an average K-12 classroom has students performing below, on, or above grade level, a professional learning classroom has teachers with varying degrees of assessment literacy.

How we personalize professional learning

Personalization happens through partnership—so we're intentional about making sure learning matches needs. We start by listening. To understand the overall context for a specific group of educators, we begin with a planning call and ask questions like:

- How familiar are you with using student data to support teaching and learning?
- What resources are part of your instructional planning process?
- What are your biggest priorities for student learning?
- What are the most important student outcomes you want to achieve?
- How much time do teachers have to devote to professional learning?

Once we've had a chance to discuss these questions, we work together to select the learning format and topics that align. Across every learning format we offer, we build learning experiences modularly, so we have a “menu” of options that educators use to select the right learning ingredients for their needs. That helps us filter out content that isn't necessary, and it also helps us





work with districts with very specific needs. Our professional learning designers are also former teachers who know how important it is to ensure that professional learning is directly connected to real value. They use a human-centered approach to create this connection and test both content and delivery formats with teachers across the country to get feedback.

Learning isn't an event, it's a process, so that means we check in regularly after a professional learning session. For example, with small-team blended learning, we send out learning boosters to evaluate progress, review common barriers and best practices, and offer solutions that connect ideas to applied practices. We also follow up with virtual application coaching, so teachers can review student progress with an NWEA expert, celebrate successes with each other, and collaborate on problem-solving.

It's all for the kids

Flexible, personalized professional learning really comes down to one thing: empowering teachers to better reach their students. When teachers take part in learning that meets them where they are, they can greatly strengthen their practice and give their students countless more opportunities to grow.

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