nwea
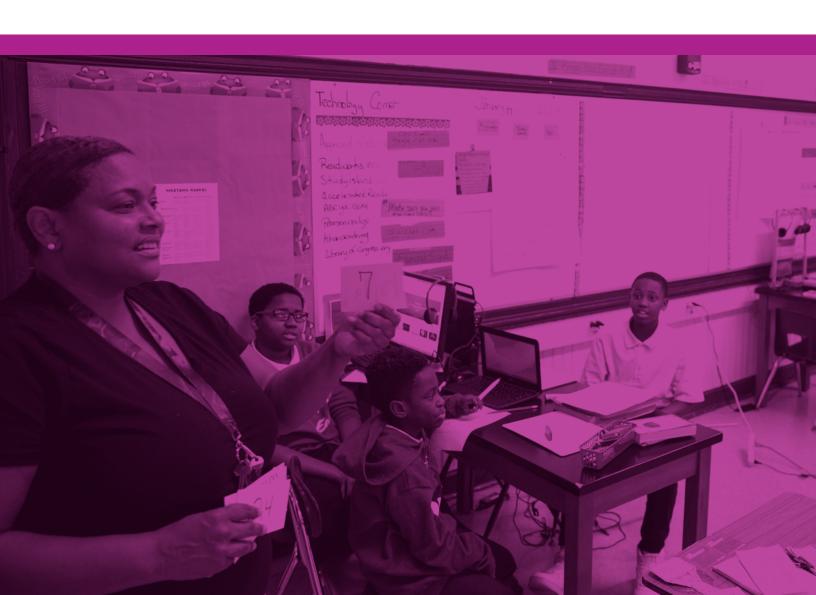
Why investing in professional learning is essential for educators— and students, too

Teachers have been a part of our history for millennia, but they've had access to student data for only a relatively short amount of that time. So when it comes to professional learning, it's important to remember that from the big-picture perspective, data is a relatively new part of teaching. Insightful, precise information points like student assessment data are often a foreign language to teachers, even those who have had access to it for years. Assessment data continues to transform what it means to teach, and effective professional learning is essential for helping teachers rise to the challenge.

In most cases, educational prep programs don't provide a strong enough background to support the volume, detail, and complexity of student data that teachers are routinely confronted with. That means that a big part of professional learning for teachers needs to be about assessment literacy: helping teachers understand what the data says as well as the variety of ways they can review and compare it.

But understanding and interpreting student data, especially key metrics like assessment data, isn't enough. Teachers need to both see what it says about their students and understand how to act on it. Student assessment data can provide powerful insights and help highlight key needs, but it's not useful without a teacher making decisions based on the data. Teachers are the drivers of change and improved student outcomes, and to harness data to support their actions, they need to know how to engage with it on an actionable level.

That's why we're at such a critical juncture for the educator professional learning industry: because in order to support teachers as primary drivers of change, we must empower them with both assessment literacy and the skills to enact meaningful changes in their classrooms based on the data.

Mindset matters

To complicate things even more for teachers, professional learning opportunities are often

perceived as periodic events that have limited impact on local school and district practices. They're often seen as a separate part of the job that doesn't directly connect to what they're facing in their classrooms, and as additional work that adds to plates that are full already. Professional learning that doesn't impact teacher practices and create positive change for teachers is the wrong kind of development—but before we discuss what effective professional learning looks like, it's important to consider how the right mindset shift can help position learning for optimal impact.

As an analogy, consider the role of ongoing learning for medical doctors. Medical science continues to evolve, just like educational practices do, and physicians are required to continue their learning in order to stay informed about modern discoveries, treatments, and medications. Ongoing learning requirements stem from the high stakes of practicing medicine; the decisions doctors make in the moment can have long-term impacts on patients.

We believe the stakes in the classroom are similar in their urgency. Teacher decisions can impact student outcomes in the long term in much the same way: research indicates that a teacher who effectively supports students in reaching third-grade reading benchmarks can have a positive impact on everything from their predicted income trajectories to their projected life expectancies. It's a different kind of saving, but teachers do save lives, and continuing education is crucial for them, too.

NWEA® works with school districts to help them reframe how they perceive, discuss, and engage with professional learning for teachers, to build foundations for effective learning and creating local communities of practice. When professional learning opportunities are perceived as an ongoing need that's vital to effective practice, teachers and school leaders are more able to engage with what they learn and evolve beyond seeing professional development as a burden.

Finding the right learning opportunities

Meaningful change relies on teachers having both actionable, precise data and the appropriate ongoing support for using the data to inform instructional practices. We approach professional learning experiences for teachers with this in mind, designing our interactions to provide that support and build mechanisms so teachers can look to each other when exploring and applying data.

The "right" professional learning opportunities will look different for every school district because they must be tailored to local needs in order to have a meaningful impact. And while learning for teachers takes many different shapes, sizes, and modalities, there are key underlying elements they must support. We believe the most effective learning experiences are built on the principles of clarifying needs and supporting action.

For example, when we're working with educators to take action based on assessment data, we ground our conversations by clarifying things like:

- **The intention behind a given assessment.** It's important to connect the assessments a district is giving with the goals they want to achieve. We start by clarifying what assessments are in place and what they're each meant to measure—and ensuring the correlation between the tests they're giving and the overall outcomes they're seeking.

- **The instructional decisions that can be influenced by specific data.** When working with student data in real time, we work with partner districts to specify the actions they can take based on what they're seeing. Whether that's identifying academically at-risk students, replicating successful individual teacher practices, or making adjustments to support proficiency goals, we help them see the possibilities in their data.

- **The risks of misunderstanding data, and how assessment data should not be used.** No matter how well-intentioned a teacher is, a counterproductive decision based on a misunderstanding of assessment data can have a negative impact on student learning. We work together to identify and mitigate risks ahead of time through a careful review of both the correct and incorrect applications of assessment data.

We also take the opportunity to see what support may be needed locally by considering things like:

- **Differing levels of assessment literacy across a district.** Effective professional learning meets teachers wherever they are in their understanding of data and provides opportunities to create shared understanding.

- **Contextual factors that impact a student population.** Teachers know their students best, and we rely on their insights to create educator learning experiences that take their context into account. As our partners help us understand the contexts they teach in each day, we build and deliver learning that takes that into account so it can be as relevant as possible.

- **Opportunities for teachers to support one another.** Some of the most powerful teacher learning happens as teachers build local partnerships and communities of practice. As we are understanding each district's needs, we seek opportunities to support the development of local communities of practice.

Having conversations about clarification and support creates a rich dialogue and ensures we avoid the pitfalls that are common in the education.

Defining what "wrong" looks like

A key aspect of finding the right professional learning opportunities is knowing what to avoid. The teacher professional development industry hasn't evolved as quickly as teachers' needs have, so it's easy to find outdated practices. Consider the warning signs of learning experiences that won't have a meaningful impact:

- **Completely scripted content.** Many bad teacher development materials are written in a vacuum with little context or relation to what actual teachers are going through. Every school district is different, and if a one-size-fits-all approach is employed, teachers are unlikely to connect it with actions they can take in their classrooms. Even established educational theory needs to be understood on a local level in order to make an impact.

- **Learning without modeling.** As teachers know, lectures alone aren't enough for learners to engage with new ideas. Learning happens when students can discuss, interrogate, and practice new ideas, and that's just as true with teacher professional learning. Effective professional development provides samples to emulate, opportunities to explore ideas, and real-world examples that teachers can practice with. If those opportunities are missing, teachers are far less likely to apply new ideas to their own teaching.

- **Infrequent check-ins.** Learning isn't an event; it's a process. That means that in order to connect with new ideas and learn to apply them in their local context, teachers, just like students, need ongoing support and regular progress check-ins. Some programs are designed to take place once each semester, which leaves too much time in between sessions without support.

- **Limited connections to real-world instructional practices, local partnerships, and student outcomes.** Surprisingly, a lot of professional development for teachers relies solely on theory and leaves it to teachers to determine if and how they might apply the theory. Connecting ideas with actions is the important part, and if that's missing, there's limited value for teachers—and limited impact on student learning. Here's a quick litmus test for considering a professional learning experience: teachers who participate should be able to articulate, in clear terms and direct actions, how the learning material can improve outcomes for their students and influence how they teach.

- **Doesn't activate learners.** Professional learning is about supporting teachers in their use of data, and it's also about building data cultures—that is, helping them teach their students that data is meaningful. Many professional development programs don't do enough to foster the community-building that can help teachers share insights and develop coordinated practices with data.

Our approach

One of the premises that the MAP® Suite is based on is differentiation—using data to deliver tailored instruction—and we apply that to how we design and deliver professional learning experiences as well.

In this case, that means that we first work with districts to understand where they are, and where they want to get to, in three key areas:

- **Assessment literacy.** We work with districts to understand how comfortable they currently are working with student data and the expertise they have locally. This is an opportunity for us to ensure the content we deliver meets demonstrated needs and covers the concepts that are most relevant in their district. Some districts are new to making decisions with assessment data, while others are more experienced and looking for ways to take their actions even further.

- **Classroom application.** One of the first questions we ask is, what are your goals for your teachers and students? The answers we receive guide the learning experiences we provide, to ensure we're designing and delivering content that's tailored to local priorities. In some cases, teachers are looking to make classroom time more efficient and, in others, teachers are looking to standardize assessment data–related practices schoolwide. When professional development is aligned with local goals and solving real-world problems, teachers get a lot more out of it.

- **Local communities of practice.** Understanding and acting on assessment data is a complicated undertaking, and it's much more effective when teachers work together. As we prepare to collaborate with school districts, we discuss how teachers are currently working together and supporting one another, and any related goals they have for building local communities of practice. Effective, sustainable change takes a coordinated effort, and we help our partners foster communities that can help them get the most out of their data.

With insights about these three areas, we customize professional learning opportunities based on district needs and goals. We recommend a plan that goes beyond the "twice a year" model and offers ongoing, multi-modal support so that we can monitor progress together and ensure that new ideas and practices aren't forgotten.

We use a modular model for the learning we offer, so that we can create development plans that focus on each partner's needs. Our modular learning covers things like:

- **Setting big-picture goals.** Goal-setting is a critical skill to develop for students, teachers, and educational leaders. We help educators create measurable goals at all levels from the classroom to the district.

- **Individual data coaching.** In many cases, it's helpful to design learning opportunities around current data so that new insights and practices can be implemented immediately.

- **Ongoing progress monitoring.** Progress monitoring is important for both students and teachers. We create opportunities for teachers and school leaders to check in on how they are progressing toward their goals, and we work together to make any course corrections they may need.

- **Having data conversations with families and staff at all levels.** Communicating about data can be challenging, both between educators and between teachers and families. As we partner with districts for professional learning, we help establish best practices around communication that fit with their local communities and cultures.

- **Building and fostering local teacher support communities.** Communities of practice, where teachers are supporting one another in their use of data, don't usually spring up organically—they're more often the result of educators taking intentional action. We find opportunities to help create and grow those communities, which are especially important for new teachers.

- **Creating student ownership and agency around data.** Student motivation is crucial when it comes to student performance and self-image. That's why we create learning experiences that help teachers empower their students in tracking their own growth: to motivate them through their own progress and to see themselves as capable, growing learners.

Conclusion

Assessment data on its own simply isn't enough to drive meaningful change. It requires teachers to understand what the data reflects and how to act on it in order to support students. When it comes to assessment data, professional learning is "the other side of the coin," so long as it's effectively structured and tailored to the needs of local educators. Ongoing professional development is key to ensuring that teachers have the expertise, the practical application skills, and the local community support to be effective in their use of data.

Effective professional learning for teachers is driven by four key premises:

- Educators need to understand what assessment data means, and what it doesn't.

- Educators need results-driven, locally relevant ways to take action based on the data.

- Teachers and school leaders require support for local communities of practice.

- Data use is most effective when it's an ongoing habit and process, and less effective when it's a periodic event.

With the right data and the right ongoing professional learning opportunities, teachers are empowered to do what they do best—make meaningful change a reality in the classroom.

nwea