

Professional Learning in Support of Effective and Equitable Arts Learning

“For most educators working in schools, professional learning is the singular most accessible means they have to develop the new knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to better meet students’ learning needs.”

—*Learning Forward, in Standards for Professional Learning (2011)*

Flourishing, responsive, intellectually challenging, and creative arts learning for all students requires a learning community in which teachers and school leaders engage in a cycle of learning, reflecting on, and improving their own practice (Little 2006; Ermeling and Gallimore 2013; Garmston and Zimmerman 2013; Learning Forward 2011). To create arts instruction that embodies the goals, meets expectations of the arts standards, and takes place within effective, safe, and supportive learning environments, teachers and school leaders should participate in a learning culture with these qualities. This section holistically discusses professional learning needs for arts educators. It examines professional learning in relation to the various roles teachers and leaders have in arts education, the qualities of effective professional learning, and professional learning models that build capacities needed for arts education.

Professional Learning Critical to Establishing a Vision for Arts Education

Professional learning is a critical ongoing part of every administrator and teacher’s career and a leading factor in student success in any content area. School leaders and teachers who understand the *what* and the *why* of arts education are better able to provide effective leadership. Administrators and teachers need professional learning that includes an overview on quality indicators of standards-based arts education that supports them in gaining an understanding of the intent and goals of the *California Arts Standards and Framework*. The professional learning content for leaders should highlight the overlapping and expanded literacy development students gain through the arts, include insight into effective teaching in the arts, and provide illustrations of the benefits gained by all students from a sequential, standards-based arts education. When administrators and other school leaders understand these aspects, they are able to articulate the vision for arts education, make decisions, and create policies that support the conditions needed for quality arts learning.

Providing professional learning that addresses arts educators’ needs is often a challenge for districts given past educational priorities that emphasized some subjects over others and the limited number of arts educators, representing five different subject areas, within

a district or school site. Investing time and allocating resources is necessary for effective professional learning to take place. To create, implement, and evaluate classroom instruction that is motivating, intellectually challenging, respectful, and engaging, teachers should participate in a learning culture that embodies the same qualities. To guide and support improvement of an arts education program, arts teachers need professional learning targeted to their role, their needs, and their students' needs. Provided with effective and ongoing professional learning, multiple-subject teachers can build their capacity to provide standards-based arts education for their students. Access to relevant and discipline-specific professional learning for single-subject arts teachers fosters opportunities for arts teachers to collaboratively address problems of practice, acquire new skills and strategies to support their students, and stay current on best practices and the latest research in arts education.

“Effective districts invest in the learning not only of students, but also of teachers, principals, district staff, superintendents, and school board members.”

— Southern Regional Education Board, in *The Three Essentials: Improving Schools Requires District Vision, District and State Support, and Principal Leadership* (2010)

Qualities of Effective Professional Learning Models

Effective professional learning models, including establishing learning communities to support educators and administrators responsible for the arts, mirrors effective qualities for all professional learning. Two documents, *Effective Teacher Professional Development Report* and *The Superintendent's Quality Professional Learning Standards*, provide insight into effective professional learning models and related attributes that are useful for arts education. The Learning Policy Institute's *Effective Teacher Professional Development Report* reviewed 35 studies to ascertain characteristics of effective professional development models and identified seven design elements of effective professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017). These elements were present in most or all of the effective professional learning experiences they reviewed. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner found effective professional learning

1. is content focused;
2. incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory;
3. supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
4. uses models and modeling of effective practice;
5. provides coaching and expert support;

6. offers opportunities for feedback and reflection; and
7. is sustained in duration (2017).

The Superintendent's Quality Professional Learning Standards, which was revised in 2015 (the standards are also known as QPLS), provides a cornerstone to guide systems of professional learning at the state, regional, district, and local school levels. It details seven standards that identify and describe the characteristics of professional learning that are "... most likely to support educators in building individual and collective capacity to meet professional, school, and student performance expectations" (California Department of Education 2015). The characteristics provided are important guidance when making choices or designing professional learning activities for arts educators. The seven interdependent standards explain that professional learning should be:

1. Rooted in student and educator needs demonstrated through data
2. Focused on content and pedagogy
3. Designed to ensure equitable outcomes
4. Designed and structured to be ongoing, intensive, and embedded in practice
5. Collaborative with an emphasis on shared accountability
6. Supported by adequate resources
7. Coherent and aligned with other standards, policies, and programs (California Department of Education, Professional Learning Services Division 2015)

The seven elements identified in the first document, combined with the seven standards in the second, articulate effective professional learning attributes that should be present to support arts educators and administrators. The design elements and standards are useful guides for administrators in designing or selecting professional learning for the diverse range of teachers of the arts, teaching roles, and various delivery systems and teaching contexts that lead to increased student learning results in arts education. Teachers of the arts will find the elements and standards descriptions useful when choosing professional learning activities that meet their needs and enhance their practice.

"It is clearer today than ever that educators need to learn, and that's why professional learning has replaced professional development. Developing is not enough. Educators must be knowledgeable and wise They must become learners, and they must be self-developing."

—Lois Brown Easton, in "From Professional Development to Professional Learning" (2008)

All teachers can benefit from sustained professional learning that is related to their teaching role; provides time for peer collaboration; provides support during implementation of new content, assessments, or approaches; and offers feedback and time for reflection. Teachers' knowledge of both the subject-matter content they teach and the pedagogical content (effective ways to teach students a specific subject) are critical for student success. Attention to and considerations of the professional learning content, skill development, and pedagogical approaches should be made to address the distinctive individual needs of the multiple-subject teachers, single-subject teachers, or teachers of other subjects. An orchestra music teacher's professional learning needs differ from a second-grade multiple-subject classroom teacher, just as an elementary media arts teacher's needs differ from a high school sound design teacher. At the same time, all teachers of the arts benefit from professional learning focused on understanding the structure, content, and intent of the standards.

Professional learning should support teachers in understanding and actualizing their role in developing artistically literate students. This includes professional learning that supports teachers in gaining new strategies for inclusion, expanding teachers' expertise in creating and implementing authentic formative and summative assessments, and in evaluating student work. Teachers of other subjects striving to include arts processes, content, and practices benefit from professional learning focused on their needs. This requires the content of the professional learning to address the underlying arts pedagogies, arts academic language, foundational arts skills, and authentic artistic process of the arts discipline(s) they are incorporating into their subject area. Development of the teachers' own confidence and technical skills in the arts discipline supports their success incorporating the arts for deeper student learning.

Professional Learning for Administrators and School and District Leaders

Professional learning is a critical and necessary support for school and district administrative personnel, school board members, and counselors. In many districts, as discussed earlier, personnel assigned to be responsible for arts education may not be fully prepared, knowledgeable about current arts education policies, or empowered to facilitate change. In some contexts, administration and supervision of the arts education program is an additional duty assigned to an administrator, or to a Teacher on Special Assignment, or a department chair. These leaders may have disciplinary expertise, teaching experience, or a credential in one of the arts content areas, but not all five. School board members and counselors also play critical roles in creating and supporting policies, and implementing practices that provide or prohibit students' access to arts education. Yet they also may not fully understand the needs, incentives, accountability, unintentional barriers, or benefits of learning in the arts.