

NAVIGATING A PATH FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DURING COVID-19

By April Gonzalez

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid shift to remote learning last spring often resulted in professional development focused on the logistics of shifting to online platforms and tools. More strategic professional learning for best practices in instruction and learning frequently became a lesser priority than the immediate challenges of the pandemic.

With the immediate future of schooling remaining unclear as the pandemic persists, one thing we know for sure is that the beginning of this school year, for most, will include some form of remote learning, and COVID-19 will continue to impact learning and instruction. We also know that remote learning cannot fully replicate the face-to-face classroom experience. This begs the question: **how can teachers apply strategies for remote learning or blended learning that will provide the kind of rigor and relevance for critical thinking and transferable knowledge and skills?**

Now, more than ever, teachers need thoughtful, targeted, well-designed job-embedded professional learning. The TNTP report [The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development](#) studied the question of whether professional development leads to improved teaching. The findings revealed that despite the investments of funding and time, traditional approaches to professional development do not necessarily lead to improved instruction and there were no clear-cut answers to this quandary. The authors noted, "Teacher development appears to be a highly individualized process, one that has been dramatically oversimplified." Teachers who were interviewed reported the need for a differentiated and tailored approach, one stating, "We need choices, too." The report, in summary, states, "Much of this work involves creating the conditions that foster growth, not finding quick-fix professional development solutions." Thus, professional development provided before and during the upcoming school year that is based on teachers' needs and involves them as active participants can serve as a strategy that will impact student learning. During the pandemic this undeniable fact has been clear: **Teachers saw the urgent need to adapt to remote learning and instruction, so they collaborated, researched, and took risks. Now is the time to support educators in their growth and learning, so they can do so for students.** As we continue to uncover the successes and pitfalls with teaching and learning in the "new normal" of the pandemic, we offer the following recommendations regarding professional learning for educators.

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The [Spire Leadership Group](#) is publishing advisories to help support K-12 educators during these challenging times. If this bulletin was forwarded to you, and you wish to receive it in your inbox, **please email the word "SUBSCRIBE"** to tim@spireleadershipgroup.com.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- Develop an advisory group that focuses on teachers' varied learning needs.
- Provide for structures for remote professional learning including PLCs, peer coaching and forums for resource sharing.
- Conduct a survey of teachers' learning needs.
- Provide professional development and faculty planning that focuses on meaningful assessment of students.
- Revisit curriculum and learning goals to ensure focus during blended/online learning.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

1. Develop an advisory group or committee to plan for the professional development needed for the various teaching scenarios and structures of this unusual school year. Each school will have unique needs, and professional development is most effective when it aligns with needs and interests. The advisory group should take time to reflect on lessons learned during remote learning this past spring and determine effective approaches for professional learning needed for the year ahead. New York City, for example, has developed a task force to generate [ideas and lessons learned](#). In addition, TNTP outlines a plan for “[accelerating student learning](#)” in the upcoming school year that includes a planning team, advisory, and reflection process.
2. Include structures for remote professional learning such as professional learning communities, peer coaching, forums for sharing resources, and access to [webinars](#) with follow-up conversations. Dr. Natalie Saaris notes in [5 Ways to Transform PD](#) that “Teachers should have the time and the tools to share their resources and think through problems together.” Schools and districts have carved out time for PLCs prior to the pandemic, and it is imperative that school leaders are creative in scheduling PLC time during virtual/hybrid learning.
3. Survey teachers’ learning needs for technology and strategies for online learning. Gathering a range of information through a survey will help to identify patterns and trends in professional learning needs, and this can help to set priorities and establish opportunities for differentiation. [Recent reflections about professional learning in 2020](#) make clear that differentiation and choice in professional learning are important considerations in empowering teachers and meeting their needs. In [Making PD More Meaningful through Personalization](#), author Andrew J. Canlé notes, “By providing staff with a platform such as an anonymous survey to self-assess and identify expertise in need of sharpening, administrators are better able to avoid prepackaged professional learning sessions and replace them with more tailored and meaningful experiences for teachers to improve their practice.”
4. Provide professional development, strategies, and plans that include meaningfully assessing students to determine their learning needs and potential set-back as well as their social-emotional needs. Professional development in wellness for educators is also important. In [Three Lessons Learned from the Pandemic about Professional Learning](#), author Elizabeth Foster comments, “One of the areas in which teachers want and deserve support and time is self-care and well-being.”
5. Revisit curriculum, learning goals, and the teaching philosophy for blended/online learning. It is likely that the circumstances of quickly transitioning to remote learning created a disconnect for teachers whose philosophies about learning and instruction were developed based on in-person instruction. In addition, revisiting the curriculum and learning goals to identify the knowledge and skills most essential will support streamlining instruction for remote learning. The TNTP [Learning Acceleration Guide](#) suggests that revisiting the curriculum and “prioritizing the most critical prerequisite skills and content knowledge for each subject area and grade level” will support addressing students’ learning needs in the upcoming school year.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

- [Sample Virtual Faculty Meeting Agenda from Spire Leadership](#)
- [5 Ways to Enhance Teacher Super-Powers During COVID-19](#)
- [Three Lessons Learned from the Pandemic About Professional Learning](#)
- [What Does Remote Professional Development Look Like for Online Teachers?](#)
- [5 Tips for Remote Learning PD Success](#)
- [Making PD More Meaningful Through Personalization](#)
- [Revising Your Teaching Philosophy for this Crisis](#)

CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC

- [Ideas to Power Next School Year](#)
- [Learning Acceleration Guide: Planning for Acceleration in the 2020-2021 School Year](#)
- [Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope with Coronavirus](#)
- [Resources and Examples: Learning in the Time of COVID-19](#)

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING

- [3 Tips for Creating Effective PD](#)
- [5 Ways to Transform PD](#)
- [The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development](#)

The Spire Leadership Group is publishing [free resources](#) for educators and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow the links below to two of our resource documents:



[Supporting Children During the Trauma of COVID-19](#): This document lists a variety of resources supporting children during the trauma of COVID-19.



[Supporting Children with Disabilities](#): This document provides a list of websites with resources for parents and teachers of children with disabilities.



The [Spire Leadership Group](#) is an education-focused consulting firm based in Philadelphia. Spire Leadership is led by founder and president Tim Matheny, who previously served as a high school principal, the New Jersey Department of Education's Chief Intervention Officer, and the founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. Spire's team includes Consulting Associate April Gonzalez, a veteran principal, assistant principal, and curriculum supervisor. For more information on Spire Leadership, please email Tim (tim@spireleadershipgroup.com), call 732-309-2296 or visit spireleadershipgroup.com.