

Modeling Student-Centered Professional Learning

To create a student-centered learning environment requires an immense amount of support and training. But most professional learning initiatives fall short in terms of choice, voice, and an emphasis on meeting curriculum and assessment needs based on statewide testing mandates.

So doesn't it make sense that professional learning should be teacher-centered: allowing educators to experience student-centered learning strategies in action?

Professional learning must be designed to reflect the same aspects of student-centered learning, where the burden of the learning is given to the learner, and the educator maintains the role of facilitator. Here are some key principles to keep in mind when creating student-centric professional learning environments:



Listen to Learners

Engage in conversations regarding teacher struggles and challenges with student engagement and ensuring equity for all students. After attempting to understand these challenges, try ranking recurring concerns (such as special needs and technology integration) and looking at them by grade level.

Breaking down the data this way uncovers common areas of need from a district level all the way down to a grade-span level, while helping to create environments and opportunities for teachers to solve the problems they face.



Empower and Energize

Give teachers an entire day to collaborate and problem-solve using the design thinking process. Pick a common challenge: perhaps an issue such as how students could be grouped. Traditionally, students are grouped by age, but teachers may want a more efficient way of meeting student-learning needs.

Teachers could settle on a common language for terms such as "student-centered" and "flexible grouping" before brainstorming and ultimately developing proposals for building leadership and administrative teams.

Another team could focus on curriculum and assessment: identifying accuracies and inaccuracies of standards, assessments, and instruction and develop strategies to improve student achievement and learning.

When teachers are gifted with time to collaborate and deep-dive into challenges to develop their own solutions, they emerge equipped and energized to tackle challenges in the classroom.



Student-centered Mindset

To build a culture of learning and ownership in our schools, professional learning must be designed using the same methods a teacher would use in a student-centered classroom. While a lack of traditional leadership may frustrate some teachers, this learner-driven professional development experience allows educators to feel what a student might encounter when abandoning traditional learning models and taking on more ownership in their learning.

Compliance is not necessarily engagement, and empowerment can be uncomfortable and confusing at first. But when educators truly talk-the-talk and walk-the-walk about student-centric learning, they gain empathy, expertise and enthusiasm for this highly motivating approach to their classrooms.