The basis for ongoing learning by professionals in an educational setting is connected to the essential reasons for schooling – learning and growth. Professional development serves as the bridge between where staff members are and where they need or desire to be in order to best meet the challenges of enabling all students to succeed. Professional learning should be viewed as an opportunity for renewal and growth. It should entice educators to acquire new and different skills in response to changing student needs, emerging technologies, new strategies, and new discoveries and approaches. While some individuals may need professional support, professional learning offerings should be flexible enough to accommodate a broad array of opportunities.

An initial inquiry very quickly becomes, what are the most effective ways to plan for and participate in professional learning? The principle of generating power for professional learning among key stakeholders is central to any process. Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council) describes three qualities of powerful professional learning which include the following:

♦ “Powerful professional learning arises from the real work going on in classrooms or schools.” (Lois Easton) A powerful experience is based on understanding how a school or district can improve learning for all students. Staff becomes engaged in identifying strategies connected to their grade or content.

♦ “The focus of powerful professional learning is on what is happening with learners.” (Lois Easton) It is about teaching and learning.

♦ “Powerful professional learning is generally collaborative.” (Lois Easton) Enriched learning experiences for adults result from learning from each other which leads to understanding what can be done to increase student learning. Common goals are established and shared. Collaborative designs hold the power to change the culture of a school and a district.
Several powerful professional learning designs can be identified and suggested. Among the collaborative designs are Lesson Study, the Tuning Protocol of Examining Student Work, Classroom Walkthroughs, many dimensions of Coaching, and Professional Learning Communities. In addition, workshops that focus on instructional design and effective strategies that are content based, models of excellence in teaching, and conferences that feature leaders in our profession who provide goals and inspiration with the best practices to achieve them, and many more. In modeling the use of these designs, the message for educators is one of quality continuous learning, offering a richer learning experience, being able to understand issues from many points of view, and building capacity in leaders and schools.

To build and strengthen a comprehensive approach to ongoing renewal is the work of successful schools. Professional learning that is viewed as essential to teaching and learning is placed at the center of initiatives and high quality instruction. “When the quality of teaching is a key element in improving education, the time spent on improving teaching is well worth the effort.” (Linda Darling-Hammond)

Growth and learning are the business of schooling. To perform our mission well, professional learning is not an option; rather, it is the fabric that holds the most potential for high performing, quality public education in this century.

The challenges of educating youth today are real; the possibilities are limitless. Progress, models, exemplars, and opportunities for professional learning surround us. I invite you to meet these challenges and to share your stories of success with colleagues. Learning with and from each other is our support, our culture, our story, our joy!

New Jersey ASCD offers professional learning opportunities in a variety of formats. Plan to attend a seminar, a workshop, an institute, a summit or a conference this year!

Register Now!