

## **Teacher Professional Learning During the Global Pandemic: Five Critical Areas to Address**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational activities and forced schools to close. It also required teachers to shift to remote teaching and learning with inadequate training, preparation, and support that would enable them to operate in an online teaching model. Consequently, school reopening calls for consideration of teacher professional learning (TPL) as a way to empower teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to cope with unprecedented challenges and provide effective instruction. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to discuss five key areas that school leaders need to address in the TPL organization in order to best prepare teachers to fulfill their duties successfully during the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** accelerated learning, contact with students and families, health and safety, pandemic, socio-emotional health, teacher professional learning, technology

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**D**ue to the new coronavirus pandemic, schools closed their doors early in March 2020 and started providing remote instruction (Felter & Maizland, 2020; Fishbane & Tomer, 2020). Such abrupt changes disrupted school activities, including teacher professional learning (TPL) opportunities. Teachers had to deliver online instruction without prior training or sufficient support (Saavedra, 2020). Only 62% of teachers had some training on teaching virtually (Hamilton et al., 2020; Murray & Hess, 2020). As of March 2020, as few as 57% of teachers

participated in new professional learning communities that would enable them to use technology and access online resources (Hamilton et al., 2020).

In addition to insufficient information on distance instruction, teachers faced other issues, such as curriculum coverage and contact with students and families. The shift to remote learning, coupled with preexisting socio-economic problems, had the potential to worsen socio-emotional issues in students' access to better educational supports (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Consequently, pandemic-related problems and leaders' incremental decisions required teachers to acquire new skills that would enable them to carry out effective instruction and help all students learn and succeed. However, the pandemic adversely affected the TPL system that was the major source of continuous support to teachers in their instructional endeavors (Hughes, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Sampat & Oommen, 2020).

Therefore, as schools prepare to reopen, school leaders should develop a strong TPL plan of empowering teachers with the capacities they need to function adequately in the pandemic (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Sarfo-Mensah, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). This essay discusses five critical areas that school administrations ought to address in the TPL organization, including health and safety, accelerated learning, technology, socio-emotional health, and teacher contact with students and families.

## **TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

TPL is one of the key drivers for creating effective schools (Fullan, 2011; Harris, 2011; King & Bouchard, 2011; Stricker, 2019; Texas Education Agency, 2018; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). TPL contributes to improving the growth of teachers' expertise and boosts their self-efficacy, with positive implications for their morale, job productivity, and retention (King, 2016). Teachers engaged through the TPL cycle become more responsible for student learning, and this responsibility grows when they see beneficial impacts of their teaching on students. Continuous TPL is crucial for growth of student competencies and improved learning as well as gradual cognitive development (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Rotermund et al., 2017). TPL helps teachers meet all student needs in an equitable fashion, which is likely to enhance student achievement (Huang, 2016; King, 2016).

TPL opportunities help beneficiaries to stay current in the field (Huang, 2016; Timperley et al., 2007). TPL is also conducive to teacher lifelong education; it breaks isolation and thus promotes collaboration and pedagogic conversation (Horn & Kane, 2015). Punitive policies that target accountability of individual teachers are counterproductive to school change and improvement. In

contrast, purposeful and collective TPL has proven to be “an essential component of any successful school reform process, improvement strategy, initiative, or intervention” (Harris, 2011, p. 626). Therefore, TPL offers teachers with opportunities to fulfill their duties differently, learn new skills, and generate effective instructional practices, with direct results on school growth and improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Reimers, 2003).

## **THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC IMPACT ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

School closures have affected around 55 million students in America’s schools (Chinni, 2020). Teachers had no choice but to carry out instruction remotely (Adams, 2020a; Adams, 2020b). Yet, they did not have sufficient support to learn strategies for online teaching in the pandemic (Morgan, 2020; Turner et al., 2020). Consequently, about 48.6% of principals from low-poverty schools and 52.1% from high-poverty schools demanded the support for TPL (Hamilton et al., 2020). During school closures, teachers lacked the support that could help them continue their professional learning related to sustaining instructional skills development in general and enhancing online teaching strategies in particular (Garcia, 2020).

Teachers also struggled to ensure that all students could access virtual learning activities. Moreover, teachers expressed a great need for differentiating online learning to meet individual student needs and engage families in their children’s learning endeavors (Beteille, 2020; Patrick & Newsome, 2020; Rosenfeld, 2020; Softic, 2020).

School closures and lack of peer interaction had the potential to harm students’ mental health. Anxiety, uncertainties, and the shift to a new learning environment affected student socio-emotional health (Balram, 2020; Fegert et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; Lee, 2020; Richards, 2020). School shutdowns caused inequities in educational outcomes for low-income and minority students, as well as students with disabilities.

The pandemic disrupted the TPL structure, and teachers missed the support they expected to adequately teach remotely, stay in touch with students and families, and provide remote learning opportunities that assisted students’ socio-emotional well-being (Herold, 2020; McClain-Nhlapo, 2020; Rothstein, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS: FIVE CRITICAL AREAS OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO ADDRESS IN THE PANDEMIC**

With the school shutdown, teachers were unable get all of the assistance needed to continue to deliver effective instruction virtually, communicate with students and families, and provide remote learning opportunities that support students' socio-emotional well-being. Most schools across the country have adopted three methods of instructional delivery: remote, in-person, or hybrid learning (von Schroeter et al., 2020). Along the same lines, schools recommend that traditional events such as parent-teacher conferences, Individual Educational Plan (IEP) and 504 meetings, and staff and professional development meetings be conducted virtually when possible (Johnston Community School District, 2020). Hence, reopening schools calls for school leaders to build new kinds of professional learning communities. They must function, both remotely and in person, to offer teachers the capacities and assistance they need for handling major issues, as detailed in the five critical areas. These include health and safety guidelines, accelerated learning, technology, socio-emotional health, and contact with students and families.

### **Health and Safety**

A few months before schools reopened, school districts issued transmission mitigation procedures that school administrators were to consider in efforts to protect the health and safety of students, teachers, staff, and families (Sharfstein & Morphey, 2020). School leaders must ensure that teachers receive information and training about the health and safety guidance because it is the teachers who interact most directly and frequently with students.

In this context, teachers should be equipped with skills related to the effective enforcement of the proper use of masks, as well as detection and referral of students who develop symptoms at school (CDC, 2020; Johansen et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Furthermore, sanitation and hygiene practices that include hand washing, cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting should be included in the skillset of teachers so they can contribute to curbing the virus among students (CDC, 2020). Teachers also need to be familiar with guidelines regarding social distancing in cafeterias, classrooms, hallways, health offices, locker rooms, media centers, and playgrounds.

### **Accelerated Learning**

The school closures changed the teaching routine and caused learning losses (Johnston, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). As schools resume, leaders and teachers will

resort to an accelerated learning strategy aimed at moving students through instruction faster than usual, allowing them to make up unfinished learning and reach expected grade-level achievement more quickly (Menendez et al., 2016; Randall et al., 2020). Teachers and leaders will determine the best way to address unfinished learning through either universal instruction or small group support (Johnston Community School District, 2020).

To do so, school leaders will need to set up professional learning communities (PLC) that will help teachers assess students' learning needs based on student data from grade-level materials, tasks, and assignments (CSAI, 2018; Johnston Community School District, 2020). Teachers will also need to learn how to identify priority standards and match curriculums to the identified student learning gaps based on the skills and knowledge with which students have struggled. This requires that teachers understand the demands of grade-level materials, pinpoint the most critical prerequisite skills and content knowledge, and remedy learning loss (Hill, 2020; TNTP, 2020). Such strategies should consequently enable teachers to use effective instructional strategies that best address the needs of students (Persaud, 2020).

## **Technology**

Most schools are implementing three instructional pathways: namely in-person, online, and hybrid learning (Goldman & Karam, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020). Successful implementation of online and hybrid modes will require teachers to master new technological tools for connecting with students and developing relationships and trust. The ultimate goal is to break transactional distance, build social presence with students, and promote an online learning community (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Lederman, 2020; Vigil, 2019). Moreover, teachers will have to acquire a new skillset for creating student engagement, promoting dynamic interaction, and giving timely feedback in a remote teaching environment (Amobi, 2020).

In this regard, several technological applications can help teachers operate in a remote environment and fulfill their instructional duties effectively. For instance, teachers need to be conversant with online tools such as Class Dojo, Edpuzzle, Google Apps for Education, Google Keep, Pear Deck, and Screencastify, to mention a few (Bell, 2020). In addition, school leaders ought to provide teachers with professional learning opportunities about web-based platforms that can enhance and facilitate their online teaching, conferencing, and collaboration proficiency, such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Miro, and Zoom.

## **Socio-emotional Health**

School closures, fear of COVID-19 infection, socio-economic disruptions, and accelerated learning are likely to trigger mental health issues, such as stress, trauma, and depression among students (Jones, 2020; Varnum, 2020). More than ever before, teachers will require substantial TPL, as they will need training to serve not only as instructors, but also as social-emotional supporters for students (Mason & Grover, 2020; Schlund & Weissberg, 2020; Shafer, 2020). Teachers need guidance to provide opportunities for students to understand and manage emotions, connect with peers, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Ho & Funk, 2018).

In practical ways, schools should equip teachers with skills enabling them to conduct student mental health assessment and surveys in order to develop mental health literacy and propose preventive measures when needed (Sage Thrive, 2020). In addition, teachers demand training on preparedness to detect and prevent suicide by making appropriate referrals in a timely fashion (AFSP, 2020). Finally, school-based mental health professionals should empower teachers with the competence to offer socio-emotional support to students who are in need (Fuxman, 2020; McClure, 2020).

## **Contact with Students and Families**

The school-parent partnership is a contributing factor to a child's typical learning journey (D'cruz, 2020; Polikoff, 2020; Tana, 2014). Unfortunately, the pandemic has affected teachers' ability to monitor their students' work because it depends on whether teachers have tools and information needed to maintain contact with students and their families.

Hence, communication between schools and families is essential, whether schools re-open in online, in-person, or hybrid instructional models. Teachers need guidance and support for continuous contact and communication with students and families to be able to achieve effective student learning outcomes in the pandemic (Hamilton et al., 2020; Polikoff, 2020). Among other strategies, schools need to have in place newsletters (both in print and digital versions) along with phone-based or web-based media platforms of communication (e.g., Class Dojo, Edgenuity, Classting, Parentsquare, Seesaw, Sesame, and TalkingPoints) that teachers can use to create and sustain connections with students and families (Williams & Ritter, 2020). Moreover, PLC teams may train teachers in filling out postcards (for students and families) and designing parent surveys as a tool to obtain information conducive to strengthening relationships among teachers, families, students, and schools.

Overall, effective school reopening plans will be highly dependent upon teachers' skills that can only be promoted in a well-organized and supported TPL system. Hence, school leaders should establish a TPL scheme that empowers teachers with the competence and assistance to take on demanding duties as described in these five critical areas. Whether teachers will feel sufficiently prepared and supported through the TPL structure to successfully meet this school year's challenges lies in school leaders' hands.

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