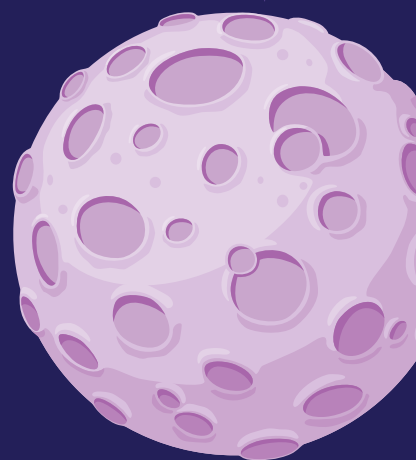# Rocket PD

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# The Ultimate Guide to K-12 Professional Development

Featuring **7 ways** K-12 professional learning is broken **— and how to fix it**

rocketpd.com

# The days of sit-and-get PD are over — and it's about time

**Teachers — educators — are among society's greatest treasures.**

**Everyone has a story about a teacher who impacted their life in some immeasurable way.**

**But being an educator is hard** — and, in the face of global pandemic, the job isn't getting any easier. In fact, research shows that **4 of 5 teachers** find their jobs more stressful since the pandemic. Making matters tougher still, **70% of teachers** say the professional development they receive from their districts falls short of expectations.

The good news? The old sit-and-get strategies of the past are on their way out — finally! The bad news? Most schools still haven't figured out what to do next.

While some school districts have invested heavily in online programs, others are bringing in thought leaders for full-day workshops. An emerging option is cohort-based professional learning. School leaders say they like cohorts because they provide an opportunity to dive deep on critical topics with colleagues from other districts, usually online over several weeks or months, to better accommodate their busy schedules.

**Regardless of the experience, experts say, to be effective modern K-12 professional learning experiences must include, at a minimum, the following:**

1. Quality learning, delivered by a compelling expert
2. A menu of available topics that matter to schools
3. Content that is Learning Forward standards aligned
4. Lessons that are practical & applicable
5. Concepts that are job-embedded
6. Ample time for self-reflection & improvement
7. Goals that are measurable & sustainable schedules.

So, how can you deliver a higher quality professional learning experience that engages and empowers your team? If you're a school leader or a PD coordinator for a K-12 school or district, we created this **Ultimate Guide** featuring **7 ways K-12 professional learning is broken** — and how to fix it, just for you.

*Are you interested in providing more engaging experiences for your staff?*

*Are you excited by the prospect of bringing people together to solve big problems?*

*Are you tired of trying and failing with the same-old, boring sit-and-get PD?*

**Then, read on...**

# 7 ways K-12 professional learning is broken
# — and how to fix it

**Rocket PD**

**①**
**②**

**Challenge:** K-12 PD is 'blah' & uninspiring
**Solution:** Find the right expert to deliver the right topic (in the right moment)

By now, if the phrases, "sit and get" or "sage on the stage" don't make you want to grab your hair and pull, you clearly haven't spent enough time sourcing K-12 professional learning.

Passive, talking-head professional development has always been exceptionally good at one thing: producing collective snores from teachers and staff.

Across the board, almost everyone agrees that the quality of K-12 professional learning in schools needs to improve — big time. The pedagogy is critical. But more (or better) research by itself isn't going to illuminate everyone's proverbial lightbulb.

By and large, your teachers and staff are experienced operators. Academic citations are useful references for these trained professionals, but most educators are going to validate the quality of their professional learning experience based on how the content (and by extension, the lesson) makes them feel — and whether the concepts discussed will work according to **two critical evaluation points**:

**①** **Their overall professional experience and**

**②** **Their unique community circumstances**

To identify compelling content, ask yourself, who is the best person in the country doing this work right now? Have you seen them speak at a conference you attended? Do they do that sort of thing? More important is their message delivered in a way that inspires educators to take risks and try new things? Is the thought leader or provider offering some sort of framework that can be both understood and practically applied in schools?

The question shouldn't be is your PD grounded in effective research? That should be a prerequisite to any program. Instead, ask yourself, who can I get to deliver this message that my team will engage with so deeply that we bring them back again next year?

Of course, the topic matters too.

## Indulge the 'rockstar moment'

If the instructor has written a book, or performed a TedTalk, use that bit of celebrity to your advantage. After the course concludes, consider inviting the instructor, either virtually or in-person, to spend the day with your team. Rather than working through specific lessons, or lectures, you might ask the instructor to spend that time more intimately — sharing stories, signing books and/or breaking into small groups to answer questions and do problems of practice. Teachers and staff don't just want access to content. They want to connect and be inspired by people.

> *By narrowing your focus, you'll find stronger programs and keep your team focused on the things that matter.*

If you've ever looked for K-12 PD for your team, you know there are no shortage of topics from which to choose. Your job isn't to find something for everyone. Rather, focus on the four to six topics that are most timely, or that stand to have the greatest impact on your strategic goals.

Topics like equity, accelerated learning, social-emotional learning and family engagement are especially hot. If you find yourself pondering a laundry list of options, consider honing your focus to go deep on the issues or topics driving key strategic reforms in your schools. By narrowing your lens, you'll identify stronger, more substantial learning opportunities and keep your team focused on the things that matter.

**③**

**Challenge:** Most K-12 PD is built to live the past, not thrive in the future
**Solution:** Look for programs that are vetted and standards aligned

Schools are notorious for doing things a certain way "because that's how we've always done them."

*Raise your hand if you've heard that line before?*

The failings of legacy professional development are too numerous to list. With teachers and staff in need of more targeted support, there is little room, or time, for further debate.

Credentialing and badges, for example, are useful features for your next program. But using PD to simply check a box on compliance or hours by virtue of a digital certificate is short-sighted and a mistake.

If your team is going to spend time completing a professional learning program, that program had better be aligned to a set of core standards designed to set them up for long-haul success. There are a few frameworks worth looking into when it comes to learning standards.

One such framework comes from the team at **Learning Forward**, which bills itself as the association for professional learning.

> The **Learning Forward** standards focus on seven core pillars.

## 7 Core Learning Forward Standards
### COURTESY OF LEARNINGFORWARD.ORG

**1 LEARNING COMMUNITIES:** The creation of organic communities to increase effectiveness of educators and results for students.

**2 RESOURCES:** Learning communities must effectively prioritize, monitor and coordinate resources for professional learning.

**3 LEARNING DESIGNS:** Effective learning designs integrate theories, research and models of human learning to achieve intended outcomes.

**4 OUTCOMES:** Learning outcomes must be aligned with educator performance and curriculum standards.

**5 LEADERSHIP:** Learning communities must empower skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate & create support systems for professional learning.

**6 DATA:** Uses a variety of sources and types of data to plan, assess & evaluate professional learning.

**7 IMPLEMENTATION:** Applies current research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning long-term.

Source: Learning Forward, **learningforward.org**

**As you're evaluating professional learning programs for your team, consider asking if the content or frameworks presented are standards aligned. Doing so, helps you set a minimum acceptable standard for choosing and working with the best providers, and gives you peace of mind when meeting with board members and other budget leaders to justify costs.**

### ④ Challenge: K-12 PD is too passive (aka sit-and-get)
### Solution: Make professional learning practical & applicable

Just like students, teachers and staff learn best by doing.

If project-based learning works for students, it makes sense that the same kind of experiential, contextual learning would work for teachers and staff.

> **Q** *How do you balance the growing demand for virtual and hybrid professional development programming with the need to get teachers and staff out of their seats and engaged in problem-solving?*

It comes down to a single word: context. The best, most impactful K-12 professional learning provides opportunities to practice real-world applications of skills and concepts.

**Example:** Say you're conducting a virtual session around online instructional delivery. Consider facilitating a peer-to-peer workshop where team members play the role of instructor and teacher. Then flip roles and conduct the same exercise again. When you're done, provide 20 minutes or so for the participants to offer constructive feedback and do some self-reflection.

> "Humans learn through trial and error — we need to make mistakes in order to repeatedly approach new problems from different angles. Making mistakes also helps us internalize what success looks like so we can better apply the new skill in higher-stakes environments. For teachers, that means their classrooms."
>
> Source: **Getting Smart, 2018**

Make sure the professional learning program or programs considered take into account context, whether delivered online or in person, and provide ample space and time for practice. Working in this way allows educators to not only envision themselves in the moment, it provides a safe space in which to make mistakes and receive constructive feedback before rolling out important practices live in the classroom.

If you're evaluating professional development opportunities for teachers or staff this year, ask your PD provider about opportunities for active learning and what the instructor (or instructors) can do to facilitate engagement and simulate problems of practice amongst your team.

## ⑤ Challenge: Sorry, but most K-12 PD just doesn't stick
## Solution: All concepts should be job-embedded

By now, you've seen the research. In one study, just 30 percent of teachers reported improvements after two years of professional learning.

**And that was before the pandemic.**

School districts used to have no more than a handful of days a year to conduct professional learning. Classrooms would shut down and teachers and staff would pack into auditoriums and district learning centers for a full-day of generalized learning. Course topics were surface level because they had to be. Time was an enemy.

In a report published by Frontline Education, just 13% of professional development programs included three or more meetings. The average length of a single PD? Just 4.5 hours.

With the emergence of virtual and hybrid learning, school districts can provide more professional learning options for teachers and staff. The rise of virtual and blended programs gives educators time and flexibility to dive deeper into specific subjects, weave professional learning opportunities into the fabric of the school year, and embed concepts and practical exercises into the ebb and flow of their workday.

Educator Andrew Canle put his finger on exactly why this so important:

> **Administrators must confront the inert hypocrisy that a one-size-fits-all PD model reveals: Teachers aren't given the same voice, choice, differentiation, and engagement opportunities afforded to students in droves.**

Source: **Edutopia, 2020**

**Example**: Say you survey a team of sixth-grade teachers. Among them, maybe a third tell you they need help with trauma-informed practices. The other two-thirds say digital instructional delivery is their top need. Rather than offer one course for everyone, what if you could offer two separate asynchronous courses delivered virtually? Then let educators choose their own content based on need and provide a series of touchpoints during the year to test concepts (in the classroom).

## Build learning for long-haul success

Imagine you want to give teachers more awareness around an important topic — say, social-emotional learning. In addition to offering an asynchronous course and an in-person workshop where teachers and staff can role-play specific student engagements, consider asking the instructor to provide a post-event evaluation and/or quarterly progress review or assignments to practice during the school day. In the case of SEL, this might include knowledge and understanding of critical concepts like Goal-Directed Behavior or Optimistic Thinking.

**Questions for your PD provider:**

• *What follow-up activities for teachers and staff are included?*

• *Does the instructor offer extended virtual Masterclasses or 1:1 coaching?*

• *Can your school or district license the course for multiple years?*

• *If yes, will updates and new modules be made available as new content is released?*

Each of these questions will help you evaluate the long-term viability and usefulness of your next professional learning program.

## 6   Challenge: K-12 PD isn't personally (or professionally) rewarding
## Solution: Focus on self reflection & improvement

When teachers and staff complain that professional development isn't satisfying, the quality of the content usually has a lot to do with it. But it's hardly the only factor. Teachers and staff, like students, need ample time for self-reflection and improvement.

> **" Providing opportunities for teachers to reflect in the context of supportive and solution-focused environments leads them to make strides toward professional goals, builds self-efficacy, establishes long-term growth, and ultimately can result in higher student achievement. "**
>
> **Aaron Marvel, Edutopia, 2018**

There's plenty of research to support this. Not the least of which is this landmark 2017 report from the Learning Policy Institute. (It's a few years old, but worth the read if you haven't yet had the chance!)

Building in time for educators to think about, learn from and practice new concepts is critical to the success of any professional development program.

**Example:** Take another subject — say, academic assessment. This one's a political powderkeg, for all sorts of reasons. But, with the fear of learning loss looming amid a global pandemic, schools want, and need, to get this right. That means helping teachers think differently.

Imagine your district is about to roll out a new assessment framework. As part of that framework, teachers are challenged to assess their students using a combination of three factors: standardized test performance; a low-stakes formative assessment, where students are asked to keep track of their own progress; and some form of teacher designed measure or cumulative review. In each case, teachers need time to self-evaluate their ability to effectively manage different components, both in the context of the classroom and in communicating outcomes with parents and administrators.

By building time for practice and self-reflection into your PD program, you ensure teachers not only understand the nuances of the new assessment framework, but that they have the time to practice applying it before working it into a live classroom or school setting.

The right PD program will not only explain and illuminate these concepts to the broader group, it will give individual teachers access to practical resources and allot dedicated time to exploring execution of these concepts on their own time.

## ⑦ Challenge: Success is hard to track
### Solution: The best professional learning is measurable & sustainable

Too often, teachers and staff go in search of programs that satisfy Professional Development Units, or PDUs. As time winds down, checking the box on the requisite time requirement becomes an obsession, more important than finding the right program or content to solve a particular professional problem or need.

This approach usually results from one of two prior issues:

1 A lack of time

2 Poor past experience

Where time is concerned, better planning and promotion of professional learning choices and options up front, including a menu of compelling topics to choose from, can help prevent a rush on PDUs as hours come due.

The only true way to overcome a lack of enthusiasm resulting from poor past experiences is to provide higher quality training — and prove to your team that your school or district is committed to offering higher-quality content that promises to challenge them and keep them engaged.

By solving for these two critical issues, you'll be able to focus less on requisite training requirements and more on measuring the impact of your training programs over the long haul.

In its excellent guide, "*__Program Evaluation for the Win__*," Frontline Education offers five reasons for investing in more critical program evaluation.

1 Evaluation allows programs to make data-informed decisions

2 Evaluation allows stakeholders to track progress

3 Evaluation serves as an early-warning system when things aren't working

4 Evaluation helps you rethink your programming

5 Evaluation helps your demonstrate success to directors, superintendents & boards

Read the full guide, here.

## Here's what Frontline recommends:

1 **Engagement & understanding** - Is the purpose of the program clear, do stakeholders know what's expected of them & what the benefit is to what they are already doing?

2 **Evaluation questions** - Come up with a list of questions at the outset like a research study. Ask: is the program changing teacher practice, is student learning attributable to this program, what improvements can be made, et cetera?

3 **Collect smart data** - Conduct quality surveys, coupled with classroom or live observations. Challenge teachers and staff to journal about their experiences and use student performance data gives a long-tail view of the program's impact on learning.

4 **Conduct data analysis** - Too often school leaders collect data, but don't know how to effectively analyze it. This is true with student learning and true with professional learning. This doesn't mean you need a degree in statistics, says Frontline. It does mean you need to think about qualitative vs. quantitative data and how to provide for both.

5 **Report outcomes** - Make sure you have a plan for how to report what you find back out to the participants and decision-makers in your community. Knowing your audience means you can dictate how and what you choose to share — and whether to use simple graphics and charts or more complex documentation.

# K-12 PD
# HOT LIST

*So, what types of professional learning are in-demand?*
These 9 concepts are on every district coordinator's PD hot list.

**Education Week** asked school leaders what professional development topics were most important to them.

**Here's what they said:**
- Recognizing trauma in children
- Working social-emotional skills into academic instruction
- Instructional skills for at-risk and underserved students
- Maximizing effectiveness of online instruction
- How to move from online to in-person instruction
- Effective online professional learning communities
- How to identify curriculum priorities and focus
- Rethinking academic assessment
- Remediating key concepts

In addition to these topics, we have recently received a record number of requests for topics related to family engagement, school communications and diversity and inclusion.

## GOLDEN RULE
### *Choose content over quantity*

There's a lot of PD out there. Some partners offer content for any topic and any subject under the sun. Ask yourself: Can all this content really be that good? Is it vetted? Will my team enjoy the experience and find value in it? Can we measure its impact? Think about the topics you really need and find a partner who can provide the best of what matters for you and your team.

## Don't go it alone

*5 qualities to look for in your next K-12 PD partner*

**1** **Willing to listen** - Make sure your PD partner understands the unique needs and circumstances of your district.

**2** **Ready to customize** - Your PD partner should display a willingness to develop custom programs designed to meet the needs of your team.

**3** **Access to the best content** - Shopping for PD is hard and the programs you find online are inconsistent. Identify one partner who can consistently source high-quality content and stick with them.

**4** **Packages that make sense** - Budgets are tight. The right partner knows how to save you both time and money. That includes things like district-wide licenses and multi-year deals with significant discounts for your team.

**5** **Strong referral network** - Access to high-quality content is critical. But the best PD providers also know when they don't have something you're looking for — and where to find it. Make sure your next PD partner has a strong referral network, and you'll never go looking for quality professional learning again.

### *Ready to launch a better professional learning experience?*

At RocketPD, we're on a mission to create the world's most engaged community of K-12 professional learners. After years of watching school leaders throw their hands up in response to boring sit-and-get PD, we committed to building a platform that gives school leaders access to three basic, but essential benefits:

1 **The top thought leaders**
2 **On the topics that matter to schools**
3 **Focused on outcomes**

If you're tired of inconsistent or ineffective professional learning, and want a partner to help you source quality programs for your team, we'd love to show you what we're working on and explore how we can help.

Visit RocketPD at **www.RocketPD.com**.

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