Developing Professional Learning Targets

EL Education schools create annual work plans that identify one or two clear goals for the year linked with student achievement priorities. These goals are derived from a close look at available achievement data including student performance on state tests and evidence related to a broader definition of achievement: authentic student products and/or student engagement, motivation and character. For example, a school might craft the following goal as part of its annual work plan:

• Students will increase their ability to apply critical thinking skills in order to demonstrate mastery of a variety of authentic academic tasks.

However, naming a student achievement goal is just the starting point. Schools then develop a theory of action that names the concrete steps the school will take to reach this goal. This process helps uncover any structural or cultural barriers to reaching the goal as well as the knowledge and skills needed to make the vision a reality. From their theory of action, schools identify long-term learning targets for all faculty members that clarify the specific professional learning that needs to take place in order to equip all teachers to help students make progress toward the work plan goal. In the case of the goal named above, the long-term faculty learning targets might include:

• I can analyze critical thinking strategies in order to clarify expectations for student mastery at my grade level.
• I can design and implement lessons that foster critical thinking through the use of Total Participation Techniques and the enhanced workshop model.
• I can use differentiation strategies to support the diverse learning needs of all students as they develop independent critical thinking skills.

Strong learning targets for adults are:

• Specific and focused
• Able to be assessed through observation and/or documentation
• Linked to strategic school improvement priorities
• Easily understood by teachers
• Made intentionally public
• Referred to frequently to support reflection and self-assessment

These data-based achievement goals and faculty learning targets are the starting points for leaders, school designers and coaches as they design professional development experiences. These experiences may be designed for the whole faculty, small groups (such as grade level teams or departments) or individual instructional coaching. Regardless of the particular structure being used, all professional development experiences in an EL school are linked to the goals and targets prioritized in the work plan.

However, while the targets listed above meet the criteria for long-term adult learning targets, they are each too big to be mastered in a single professional development experience. Therefore, facilitators need to “unpack” each long-term learning target into a set of supporting learning targets that clearly name what teachers need to KNOW and be able to DO in order to demonstrate mastery of the long-term target. These supporting learning targets do not typically appear in the work plan but facilitators need to take this step in order to plan
effective professional development experiences for staff members in their buildings. To be clear, this process of unpacking learning targets is an ongoing process and does not necessarily need to take place at the same time as the work plan.

Let's take a look at an example based on one of the learning targets from above:

**LT: I can design and implement lessons that foster critical thinking through the use of Total Participation Techniques and the enhanced workshop model.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do teachers need to KNOW?</th>
<th>What do teachers need to BE ABLE TO DO?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Identify a variety of Total Participation Techniques (TPT)</td>
<td>• Plan an effective enhanced workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Know how TPT foster critical thinking</td>
<td>• Strategically choose the appropriate TPT to match the workshop and the needs of students</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify the elements of workshop model instruction and the rationale for each element</td>
<td>• Implement the workshop and TPT effectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Analyze the adaptations for an “enhanced” workshop</td>
<td>• Use evidence to assess whether the TPT was effective in fostering critical thinking in students</td>
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As you can see, this single learning target contains a great deal of potential content for supporting learning targets. However, each of the items on these lists will likely not become its own supporting learning target. Rather similar ideas can be combined to create supporting targets that would be suitable for a particular professional development experience. When identifying these targets, it is often helpful to write the target with a verb that emphasizes application of a particular skill as opposed to merely understanding a concept intellectually. That’s not to say that we ignore helping teachers develop their knowledge base but rather we push as quickly as possible to application/skill level.

Returning again to the example above, the supporting targets for this long-term target might include:

• I can explain the purpose and structure of several Total Participation Techniques.
• I can design daily workshop lessons that incorporate at least one TPT.
• I can gather evidence of critical thinking through observing TPTs and documenting student responses.

Once these supporting targets have been identified, facilitators determine which combination of professional development structures is best suited to the target (whole group, small group, one-on-one coaching) and set about designing a detailed plan for a particular professional development session.