EVOLUTION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Explore how professional development can be achieved through a blended learning approach.

participate

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INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century must be continual, perpetual and global. Continuous learning is designed to harness connections to power teacher learning and classroom practice in order to achieve better student outcomes across the world.

Teachers ignite students' innate curiosities and excitement about learning. As a result, they need opportunities to learn every day, experience professional growth and have autonomy based on their expertise and experiences.

Professional development (PD) programs must consider teachers' existing experiences, professional knowledge and interests, while allowing opportunities to apply new concepts into the classroom. This ensures relevance and authenticity, which is critical for both students and teachers.

The focus on the importance of professional development for teachers continues to grow over time. The challenge, however, is providing creative and effective strategies to support teachers as they learn with their students.

The cornerstones of PD programs are:

- **Deepen teachers' content knowledge**
- **Directly connect to classroom practice**
- **Address student learning and development**

In this paper, we will explore how professional development can be achieved through online learning, in-person collaboration or a blended learning approach.

EMBEDDING CLASSROOM PRACTICE INTO IN-PERSON LEARNING

Integrating classroom practice into the professional learning cycle is essential if teachers, schools and districts want to implement effective professional development (PD) strategies.

Research has shown that effective PD models should be:

- **Ongoing with significant duration** as researchers found 80 hours or more were needed to actually see teachers use the new practice in their classrooms
- **Differentiated** so that learning opportunities are available based on a teacher's experience, student population, content area and input from peers and administrators
- **Active, inquiry-based and focused on modeling** so teachers try out what they are learning
- **Innovative** and utilize technologies that allow for interest-driven learning
- **Collaborative to create communities** that positively impact school culture
- **Incorporating expert coaching**, support and reflection

In any collaborative PD design, incorporating feedback and observations from colleagues is an effective form of professional learning that relies on experimentation, observation and reflection of classroom practice. Reflection leads teachers to think about what could have been done differently, what was successful and what could be improved upon for the future. This PD approach brings the design process into classroom practice, ensuring a cycle of learning, experimentation, reflection and revision.

This can be done with in-person learning through small group interactions, one-to-one coaching or school- and district-wide learning experiences.

Workshops and in-service training must incorporate these collaborative practices to affect student outcomes and teacher retention.

Example of successful in-person learning:

"One effective in-person learning experience we have conducted was a **teacher to teacher training**. Each teacher brought an activity or idea to share with others and the accompanying resources. After the learning occurred, teachers could follow up with one another to check in on progress or ask questions. We have centered this experience around specific topics or learning standards, or it can be more open-ended based on teachers' interests."

– Kimm Murfitt, IB Coordinator
Winkler Middle School

THE POWER OF CONNECTIONS AND SOCIAL LEARNING

Building 21st century skills, mastering critical thinking and becoming fluent in digital media and technology are an essential part of student learning. In this environment, perpetual education is crucial. Continuous education requires all of us to discover new ways to learn that are enabled by technology, particularly through expanding connections that exist within professional learning communities (PLCs).

This is why hundreds of thousands of teachers around the world are participating in online learning experiences like Twitter chats, courses and organically organized professional learning communities. It is within these social environments that teachers can share best practices, as well as how they use various apps, open educational resources and digital tools in their instruction.

Educators who self-organize online and in social networks with peers around the world are pioneers in the continuous learning movement. Continuous learning platforms are emerging that incorporate these always-on, community-based learning opportunities into more formal professional development programs. Communities of Practice (CoPs) offer sustained social learning that can integrate seamlessly with any professional development program.

This new mindset recognizes that **it is not about the acquisition of knowledge, but the ability to harness ideas they learn from peers** down the hall—or across an ocean—and determine how they can most effectively implement ideas with students.

Just as in-person learning must be ongoing, differentiated, active and innovative, online learning must also have these characteristics to be effective.

When choosing online learning for educators, it is essential that this learning go beyond a computer screen and reach the classroom, in order for it to be right for you and your students.

Badging, micro-credentials and curation technologies are making this a reality. Teachers are now able to earn graduate credit or continuing education units for taking part in an online conversation with peers.

Online learning has the power to connect isolated educators, make diverse resources accessible and ensure meaningful collaboration wherever the learning takes place.

BLENDED LEARNING USED TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

More and more, schools and districts are looking to personalize their PD model, often a blended approach, one in which online learning and in-person collaboration are used together to expand learning. Blended models are most effective when they are intentionally designed to maximize the unique characteristics of each.

Many new skills and resources become outdated by the time they are institutionalized in top-down professional development environments. This is why so many educators are attracted to professional learning communities and networks that enable them to share ideas, best practices and new digital technologies including apps, videos and open educational resources.

This can be done online and through in-person grade level planning or staff meetings to ensure tools and resources are accessible anytime, and also carried out in teacher practice.

Blended learning models such as the one implemented by Alamance-Burlington School System in North Carolina (see next page) ensure that PD is differentiated and active, meeting the unique needs of each educator through both online tools and in-person collaboration.

HOW ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT IS DELIVERING PERSONALIZED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO ALL TEACHERS

When Alamance-Burlington School System (ABSS) was looking for ways to align the district's strategic goals to professional learning, they knew that a digital learning solution was a critical piece of the puzzle.

ABSS is a public school system in North Carolina serving more than 22,500 students with 1,800 licensed staff. In the 2015-16 school year the district created an instructional model, called the Core Four. The underlying vision of this model is that exemplary teaching leads to exemplary classroom learning and student success.

District personnel understood that teachers would need time and resources to learn about Core Four, so they set about structuring professional learning days that would provide differentiated learning opportunities. The digital solution would need to host 192 sessions across the district. How would they organize, facilitate and communicate about these concurring sessions? They needed the technology to be easy to use without putting an unnecessary burden on teachers.

22,500
students

1,800
licensed staff

36
schools

Challenge #1: Creating clear pathways for teacher leadership within the district.

Solution: Instead of bringing in outside professional development coaches or organizations, ABSS looked to their internal expertise and asked teachers across the district to lead sessions for colleagues.

Challenge #2: Providing differentiated professional development opportunities to teachers and staff.

Solution: ABSS decided to ask teacher leaders to facilitate sessions across the district so that each teacher had choice and autonomy in what they learned.This was so well received that they met their goal and had more than 190 sessions to offer teachers across the district.

Challenge #3: Ensuring effective classroom implementation after PD sessions are completed.

Solution: Participate is able to issue a digital badge which ensures that each teacher's application of learning is captured and can be reviewed by the district to identify further learning opportunities in future sessions. Classroom implementation was documented and easily accessible online.

Challenge #4: Reaching 1,300 teachers in the district to ensure communication and collaboration was seamless in addition to scaling the PD sessions to reach everyone.

Solution: The Participate platform allowed teacher leaders and district personnel to organize session materials online, communicate with one another and ensure session sign up and attendance was easy.

Results

99.1% of participants reported that the sessions conducted on February 21, 2018 either met or exceeded their expectations for professional learning.

200+ micro-credentials were awarded at the first of three session days throughout the school year.

10,617 hours of professional development have been completed throughout the district during the 2017-18 school year.

1,617 digital badges have been earned by teachers across vthe district, each demonstrating classroom implementation and reflection of learning.

AN INSIDE LOOK:

Building positive school culture through flexible PD

By Gerald Hernandez, Principal at E.E. Miller Elementary School

As the instructional leader of E.E. Miller Elementary School, my role as principal is to significantly influence teacher development. Teachers must understand the why, or the significance of what we are trying to teach them, and remain committed to continuous improvement for PD to be effective.

We correlate the PD in our building with school improvement goals, and having a concrete vision of the goals drives the PD decisions. I like to believe that the learning we see happening among adults at our PD sessions resembles the learning that should happen in classrooms between teachers and students.

Our team leading PD sessions was traditionally made up of administration and instructional coaches. With our county's new distributive leadership model, we identified other educators in our building to assist with growth.

I articulated to staff that we are a team and we are in this together.

Creating good relationships is essential to building a positive climate, inspiring teachers to take risks and sustaining long-term academic growth.

This year, our staff capitalized on one another's strengths in a variety of ways. We used Twitter as an opportunity for PD where everyone is both a teacher and a learner. Teachers spent time sharing the great things happening in their classrooms for other teachers to see, and we as a staff celebrated one another and implemented the ideas in other classrooms.

Not only did teachers learn from their peers, but they celebrated one another. This was key to promoting a positive climate. It became a blend of online and in-person professional development.

During more traditional PD sessions, we include flexible options that allow staff to individualize learning experiences. Teachers are tasked at the beginning of the year with creating Professional Development Plans that contain goals to improve teaching and learning in their specific classrooms. The flexibility of how to attain those goals is given to the teachers.

Teachers simulate strategies and lessons discussed in PD, ultimately providing feedback about the value of a specific PD experience. After any PD teachers participate in, it is important to follow up in order for the practice to have a lasting effect. Classroom observations continue to provide teachers with constructive feedback and coaching as new strategies are implemented.

These are all examples of blended learning—a PD methodology that is growing in popularity because teachers can work on their own time and at their own pace. Discussion boards and dialogue at staff meetings about online courses have presented us with opportunities to discuss our learning, additionally allowing teachers to become more fluent in various technologies.

This year, our school also became a Participate global school, in which teachers complete courses in a blended platform. This model has expanded teacher networking opportunities, as teachers began collaborating on common topics as they created collections of resources. They also tailored their learning to meet the needs of their specific students.

With blended learning, a teacher can spend more time researching a particular topic that resonates with what is happening in their classroom.

This forum for learning allows for engaging learning at various comfort levels. The courses include featured videos, links to websites, articles and links to other collections that were created by teachers from around the world. Several teachers are now experimenting with additional technology tools because they had a positive experience with this PD. They concluded that their own students would be more engaged with a more personalized experience through the use of blended lessons.

By giving our teachers choice of how they want to learn, what they want to learn and at what rate they want to learn, we personalize their professional development experience. We are very excited about our continuous journey of improvement! ◊

AN INSIDE LOOK:

Why good teacher PD leads to better student outcomes

By Allison Violette, former Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Choosing a pathway of professional learning for an entire school district is an integral part of district support and improvement. The starting point for any district initiative should always be the students. This means asking the right questions about what a district wants student learning to look like, if teachers are providing the envisioned learning environment and what support teachers need to provide the environment.

For our school district, this was the case. As the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, I had a first-hand view of:
1) How a focus on student learning can define a professional development plan
2) How current teaching frameworks and environments are working
3) Assessing teacher needs for support and improvement

It all started in our district with a small advisory group defining the knowledge, skills and learning expected from our students. Defining these skills made it evident that the teaching and learning environments of our schools must transition from a traditional model to a digital age one. With this clarification we surveyed teachers, asking what their needs were to better prepare students for the world ahead.

The results indicated teachers wanted professional development on student-centered learning in the digital age. They wanted to make learning personalized for students and prepare them for the world ahead. This focus area was a great fit to the district's vision of empowering all students to collaborate, compete and succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

In order to lead, support and model the teaching and learning expectations teachers wanted in the classroom, we started by building the capacity of the central services support staff that serve our schools. This helped to build confidence and allowed the central services staff credibility when working with teachers in schools.

With improved skill sets, the central services support staff was ready to create our own professional development sessions. A blended model was used to deliver district-wide professional learning to nearly 3,000 teachers in our district.

School administrators and instructional coaches were trained on the content and then delivered it at their individual school sites face-to-face. Teachers also worked with online content, working in grade level or subject area groups for application and implementation ideas.

Year one was all about building teachers' skill sets around future-ready learning with a focus on P21's 4Cs (collaboration, creativity, cooperation and critical thinking) and the Hunt Institute's Digital Teaching and Learning Framework. The administrators and instructional coaches modeled technology integration in their presentations, laying a foundation for teachers to experiment and take risks with the ideas they were learning about.

No mandates were given, and teachers were able to explore and implement at their own pace with the support of administration and instructional coaches.

With this atmosphere of trust and support, many teachers began to ask for more ideas and strategies for technology integration. collaboration wherever the learning takes place.
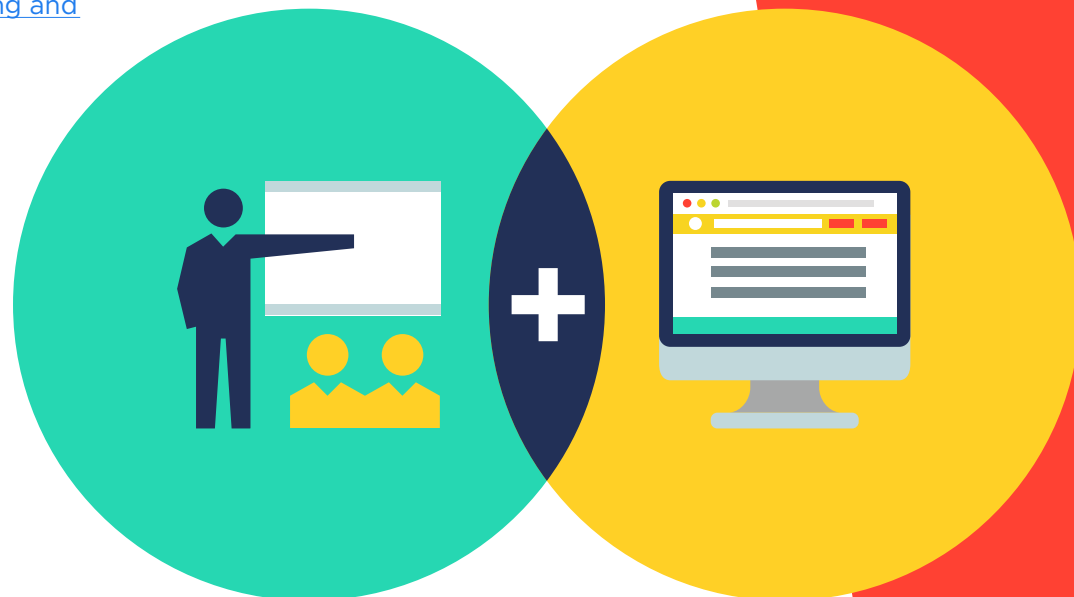
Optional after-school in-person sessions were offered centrally with open lab times for teachers to stretch their learning. The technology department was key in the success by providing teacher tools and support.

Instructional coaches were also equipped to provide on-site support for those teachers wanting more. To cap off the year, a tech camp for teachers was provided. This two-day conference allowed teachers to showcase strategy implementation and network with one another.

In year two, the same blended model was used with the administrator and instructional coach delivering content and teachers also interacting with online content in collaborative groups. The focus for year two was around the work of Alan November as well as the SAMR model.

Again, we approached the year with a sense of support for teachers, not pushing but encouraging an environment of risk taking.

As they saw increased student engagement and excitement for learning, teachers looked for additional ways to transition their instruction to align with a digital teaching model.

Our media coordinators and AIG teachers began a program called Beyond the Books which transformed many of our media centers to Makerspaces, video recording spaces with green screens and robotic design areas. A Maker Fair was held in the spring to showcase all the school projects. It was amazing to watch kindergarten students explaining to adults how they had programmed sphero balls to follow a track! A second tech camp was also held with double the enrollment from the previous year.

For year three, the district professional development centered on the NC Digital Learning Competencies for Teachers. A distributive leadership model was implemented for delivery of the content. In this model, each school established a team of administrators, coaches and teachers to serve as the facilitators of the professional learning.

School teams received one full day of training for each presentation session with the morning focused on the content and the afternoon spent in school team planning sessions. As part of each school team's work, a needs assessment was completed along with a road map to supporting teacher growth in the competency areas. Again, another successful Maker Fair and tech camp was planned with increased participation. Even a coding camp for students is in the works!
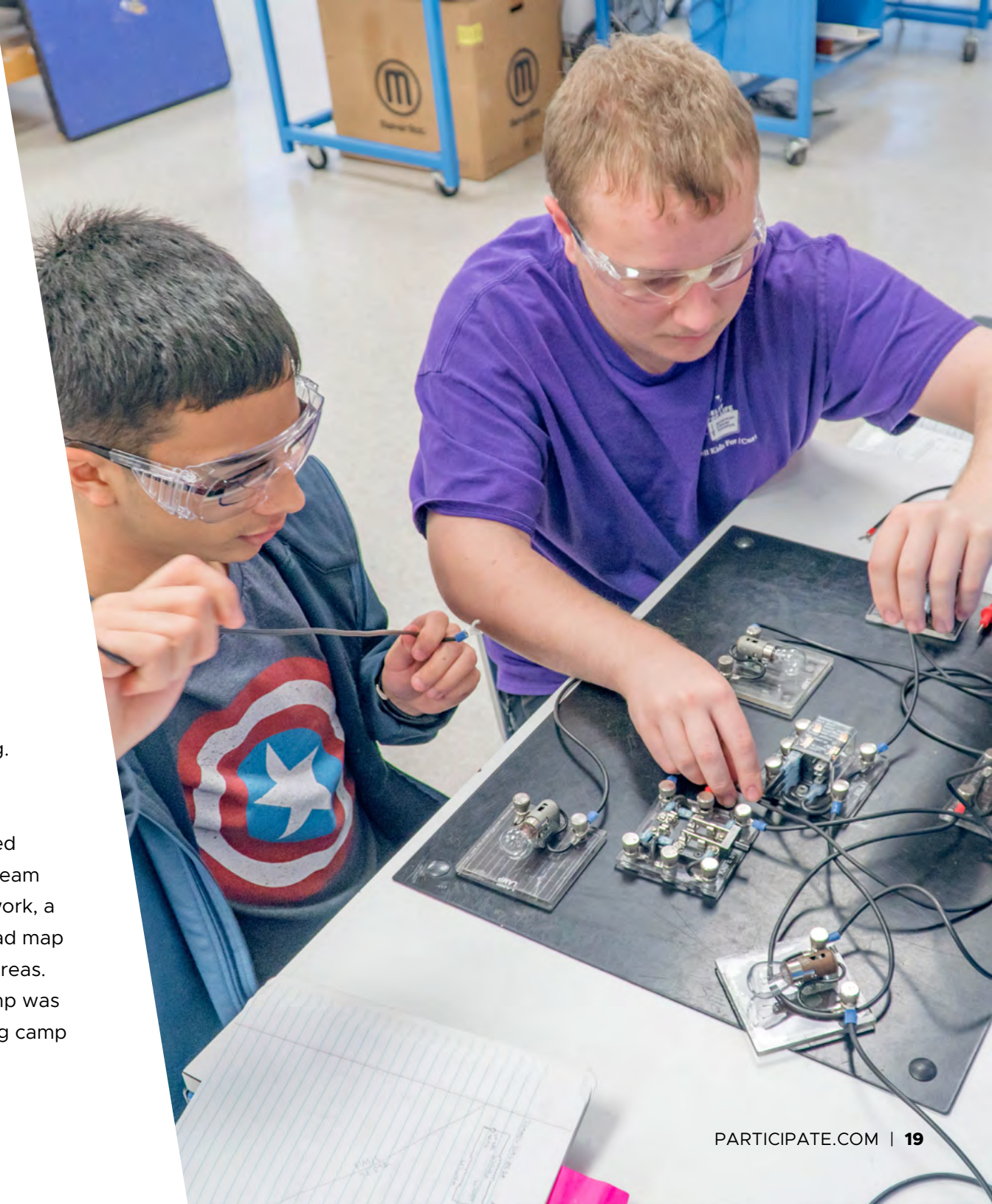
From a district leader's perspective, I learned many lessons throughout the process. First, begin with students.

By having a clear vision of student success, we designed a professional development plan that equipped teachers to transform to a digital learning model.

Secondly, involve teachers. Ask for their input and reflection when planning and evaluating. Another important lesson for me was not to mandate but to allow an atmosphere of trust and support. Teachers are professionals, and when presented with ways to engage students, change in practice will occur. Build off the strengths of teachers and showcase their success and the success of their students. Seeing students motivated about learning is motivation for teachers!

Supporting teachers in their professional growth is really an investment in supporting students. When teachers improve their teaching capacity, students benefit. Teachers constantly are searching for ways to engage and excite students about learning. As district leaders, we must design professional learning experiences that allow for both student and teacher growth. ◊

AN INSIDE LOOK:

Attaining equity through globally focused PD

By Jason Van Heukelum, Superintendent of Winchester Public Schools

As a superintendent, I am always looking for problem-solving strategies to ensure equitable outcomes for the students in my district. As districts and schools become increasingly diverse, it is essential to examine where equity problems might occur, their root causes and strategies to address them.

In Winchester Public Schools, we have discussed multiple root causes of equity challenges and many strategies to address them. And while global education is not the only strategy we are using, global education and culturally immersive PD have been successful in my district.

Equity challenges stem from a number of causes, including students' early childhood experiences, poverty, social capital, explicit and implicit bias, and a cultural divide between staff and students and families. We have implemented strategies to address these challenges, such as providing access to preschool, using culturally responsive teaching practices and hiring a more diverse workforce.

However, we have also come to recognize that students' sense of belongingness in their school community is a key ingredient to achieving equitable outcomes. When students believe they belong, that they are "shareholders in the company," learning is more efficient and accelerates.

Why is global education a good strategy to align to the root cause of "belongingness"?

Division Race Ethnicity
Division(s): Winchester
Source: Virginia DOE Enrollment Data
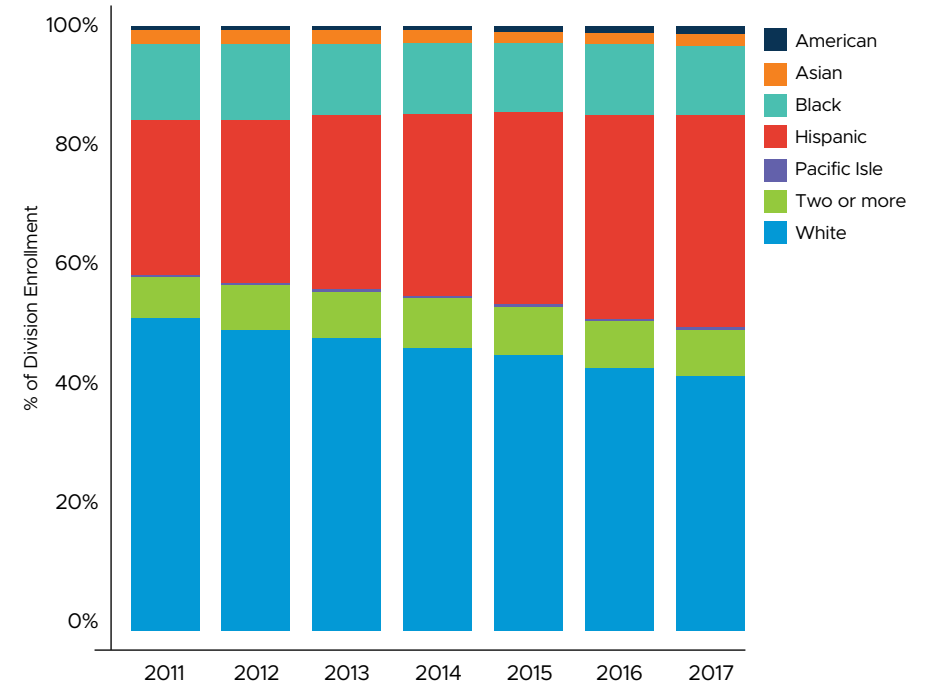
Culturally immersive curriculum and global schools demonstrate global education as a framework through which to teach content. In these contexts, students across differences see their race, culture and language as a value-add to the school environment because the entire curriculum framework is viewed through cultural awareness, appreciation and many times, social justice.

When our students believe they belong and actually "own" the school as if they are shareholders, they approach learning in a different way.

To teach this content, we must first train teachers in best practices of global education.

By infusing global themes throughout curriculum, developing global-ready staff and ensuring access for all students, we can create educational environments that encourage student creativity, innovation and equitable opportunities. ◊

"Belongingness is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of the group... **people have an inherent desire to belong and be a part of something greater than themselves.** The need to belong is the need to give and receive attention to and from others. Without belonging, one cannot identify themselves as clearly, thus having difficulties communicating with and relating to their surrounding."

– Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary
Social Psychology

CLOSING

Teacher engagement must be a priority to ensure open learning environments in classrooms. Well-designed, collaborative PD is part of the solution, whether it is face to face, online or a blended model.

Professional development in the digital age should be participatory in nature, where ideas and resources are exchanged and incorporated into instruction. For decades, lofty school reform rhetoric has identified the skills and knowledge that have to be integrated into everyday practice. Yet all too often the structures and demands of teaching in most schools create too many barriers. All stakeholders need to come together to create an environment in which innovative PD can thrive.

When educators are empowered to build creative environments, learning can impact the world beyond the classroom.

EVOLUTION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Learn more

If you are interested in enhancing your organization's professional development model, contact us at partnerships@participate.com to start a conversation.

We'd love to work with you.

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