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# Effective Professional Learning Strategies

*and Their Use in Future Ready Districts*

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# Effective Professional Learning Strategies and Their Use in Future Ready Districts

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This document presents examples of districts that are engaged in online and connected learning and are integrating face-to-face with online and connected professional learning strategies aligned with student learning and improvement goals. We describe examples as effective professional learning strategies in this context because districts have been intentional in identifying a strategy to accomplish their purpose(s), and they have found the integration and/or implementation of the strategy to be worthwhile.

Your cross-stakeholder district team should use this document in conjunction with other tools in the *Empowering Educators Through Professional Learning Toolkit* decision-making process. After completing the *Professional Learning Strategies Self-Assessment Tool* for your current high-priority student learning and improvement goal(s) and corresponding professional learning strategies, the examples presented here may serve as models that inspire you to refine and better integrate your professional learning strategy or set of strategies to achieve your goal.

More detailed profiles of districts that illustrate ways the districts have designed and implemented effective online and connected professional learning can be found online at [tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning](http://tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning).

These practices generally align with professional standards and are supported by the research referenced throughout the toolkit. However, most of the practices have not been tested through extensive experimental studies. They should not be taken as recipes to be replicated with fidelity but as starting points for developing locally appropriate practices that you will test through ongoing formative evaluation.

This document is part of the *Future Ready Schools: Empowering Educators through Professional Learning* toolkit and can be found at [tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning](http://tech.ed.gov/FutureReady/Professional-Learning).

# Brief Descriptions of Online and Connected Professional Learning Strategies

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Pages 3–11 provide brief descriptions of online and connected professional learning strategies related to one or more of the following purposes of the toolkit:

- Foster online and connected learning as part of the day-to-day activities in schools and districts.
- Integrate online and connected learning with ongoing face-to-face and formal professional learning, aligned with improvement goals.
- Connect with other networks and online communities of practice nationally and globally.

# 1

## FOSTER ONLINE AND CONNECTED LEARNING AS PART OF THE DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Effectively integrating connected learning for educators has to be more than just another add-on program. Integrating connected learning requires deep changes in school and district culture and requires leaders to model the practices they want to see educators adopt and students to have regular opportunities for connected learning at school.

The following are some strategies for embedding connected learning into professional learning policy and practice.

- A** **Develop a connected coach program** in which staff members immersed in connected learning can be paired with staff who are not. Then, create a shared space (e.g., blogs, wikis) to capture goals and outcomes or reflection on the learning, as a way to motivate other educators.
- B** **Set a simple goal.** For example, find one educator with whom to share the measurable learning goals of your classroom or school. Or use the [edConnectr tool](#) to find several global partners with whom to collaborate on a goal aligned with school or district improvement.
- C** **Designate time in the school day and week** for educators at all levels to collaborate and connect (e.g., 20 minutes a day for Twitter, an hour a week for an online community of practice), and demonstrate how they educators can align their work with school and district improvement goals.

*"There was a principal from a school district in Indiana, where they have two hours a week for professional collaboration. They start school an hour late on Monday and the teachers come in an hour early so they have two hours to work together. That kind of concentrated dedicated time I think works...because you have time to know each other and you have time to value the contributions that everyone makes whether you're a first-year teacher or a veteran teacher or a teacher who has written books that other teachers read. We have to find a way to make it a real community."*

- Sandy Hayes, president, National Council of Teachers of English

*"I think that administrators need to know that if they actually want connected teachers, they need to be giving them designated time to be on Twitter, that it's legitimate professional development that's ongoing.... You're not going to learn unless you take 20 minutes a day, an hour a week, however much time you can, to begin to build those relationships."*

- Hadley Ferguson, middle school history teacher

At **New Milford High School**, in New Milford, New Jersey, instructors are allotted a professional growth period (PGP) during the school week (in place of some noninstructional duties). Individual teachers choose how to spend two to three class periods per week and are allowed to pursue anything in professional learning for which they have a passion, as long as the professional learning is aligned with improving student learning and achievement. All teachers create learning portfolios documenting this growth, and the portfolios are aligned to their performance evaluations. In the portfolios, teachers provide evidence of what they did, why the activity or learning is important, and how it helps student learning. Teachers are thus empowered to do what they want and get what they need. To help motivate teachers and promote greater sharing among the faculty, the district also offers badges to teachers based on screencasts they make demonstrating what they learned during their PGP. For a model of the PGP, see [Principal Eric Sheninger's blog](#).

In the [Making It Count Connected Educator blog](#), Anne Mirtschin shared [a typical day](#) in her life as a connected educator in Australia. Molly Shields wrote to urge connected educators to stop complaining about not having enough time. In her opinion, teachers have a professional responsibility to make time.

Educator Stephanie Sandifer, in her [Connected Educator profile](#), has suggested small steps districts can take to carve out time and help newcomers get started with connected learning:

*"When I speak to other nonconnected educators about this and I do hear the response about not having the time to connect, I try to give them tips for getting started in small steps. It isn't necessary to dive into writing lengthy blog posts on a daily basis or hanging out on Twitter all day long. The best way to begin is to start by allowing for 15 minutes each week to scan a Twitter feed (after creating an account and following people) and interacting with other educators through that resource. In addition to giving them an easy-to-do tip, I also try to appeal to their need for just-in-time information and help beyond their immediate department or grade-level team. I might demonstrate how I use Twitter (even within just a 15-minute period) to ask a specific question about a current work dilemma and receive responses from the people that follow me. I may also demonstrate how to use Twitter as a search engine to find current*

*links and resources on certain topics related to current work activities. This helps them see that (a) it doesn't take very much time to gather information in this manner and (b) that Twitter (and other social media tools such as Facebook and Pinterest) can be very useful for more than just personal connections with family and friends."*

- Stephanie Sandifer, educator in Houston

**Use online document sharing applications** to help busy educators collaborate: it produces a shared product, the value of which is self-evident.

D

**Chris Lehmann**, principal of the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, said in a CEM 2013 [kickoff panel](#) that online document sharing technologies are, in his experience, the “killer app” for convincing educators of the value of being connected because using the technologies to collaboratively complete work they would have to do anyway saves time and may increase quality.

Through [her blog](#), **Tracy Watanabe**, technology integration specialist and Common Core co-coordinator at Apache Junction Unified School District in Arizona, shared a general presentation on using online tools for collaboration. The applications she describes can be used to enhance collaboration among educators and students.

**Create a social media policy** that supports open leadership and transparency. Encourage district leaders to model connected learning through blogging, tweeting, and sharing.

E

*"If you are communicating that you need to walk the talk, you need to be connected. So if the district is going to say it's okay to do this, then the superintendent, the school board members, and other district leaders should be out there, they should be connected....That's when people start to trust you because they see that you're doing it and that you are communicating openly and transparently you're not just broadcasting through meetings."*

- Stephanie Sandifer, educator in Houston

In his [Connected Educator profile](#), administrator **Chris Lehmann** noted that:

*"Being a connected educator helps me build community among students, teachers, and parents. Using social media with families allows parents glimpses into the school day, whether it is through posting a picture on Instagram or tweeting out a piece of student work. Following students on Twitter allows me a window into how the students are*

*thinking and feeling...The kids love to tease me that I'm 'twatching' them, but at its best, doing a quick skim read of what kids are thinking and feeling allows me to care for them and approach them when they don't even know they need it. And what always humbles me and makes me smile is when students are willing to tell us—social media or face-to-face—that those moments matter to them as much as they matter to me."*

- Chris Lehmann, principal, Science Leadership Academy

In his [Connected Educator profile](#), administrator **Patrick Larkin** described his practice of modeling how to be a connected leader:

*"I model by sharing resources online, in print resources, and in person. Online, I am actively sharing resources on Twitter and on my blog. I am also a regular contributor to Principal Leadership, the National Association of Secondary School Principals monthly magazine for school administrators. I am also a regular presenter at local, state, and national conferences on the topic of school leaders utilizing online resources to connect their schools, their students, and their communities for basic communication and also for school improvement."*

- Patrick Larkin, assistant superintendent for learning, Burlington Public Schools

*"The biggest thing for me is to be a model. What I try to do and what a lot of folks in my district try to do...we're participating in Twitter chats. We're also doing a lot of talking to teachers about 'Hey, here's how to get connected,' and so we're offering them, I think, good solutions to problems....The other thing that I think that a lot of people are doing really well is just showing the value...being that model of being a connected educator and showing not just how you do it, but 'Here's the benefit to student learning. Here's why you need to do it.'"*

- Steven Anderson, director of instructional technology, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools

**Stacey Schmidt**, superintendent of Porter Township School Corporation in Indiana, described in [her blog](#) how her connections go beyond Twitter. She created an [infographic](#) that chronicles how she uses tools every day, such as Feedly, Buffer, and Twitter in combination, to find and share articles; she also blogs regularly. Over time, she notes that her blog has gradually evolved from reporting on what she has read elsewhere to sharing her own ideas. She also makes time in her busy schedule to

meet face-to-face with educators, students, and her community.

As superintendents and principals perform instructional rounds, they share examples of instructional innovation and student work on Twitter.

Through her [blog](#), Tracy Watanabe shared a webinar she presented: “[Using Instructional Rounds to Create 21st Century Schools](#).” She based her work on a related book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, by Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel.

The Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), the professional organization for school technology leaders, has published an update of their acceptable use policy (AUP) guide. Written by James Bosco of CoSN, principal investigator of *Principal Learning in Schools: Leadership & Policy*, the guide [Rethinking Acceptable Use Policies to Enable Digital Learning: A Guide for School Districts](#) addresses the following eight key questions:

- How does policy differ from procedure, and does the difference matter?
- What federal laws regulate Internet use in schools?
- What state laws regulate Internet use in schools?
- What are two ways that school districts develop or revise the AUP?
- When—how often—should school district AUPs be updated?
- What are the implications of moving from an AUP to a responsible use policy?
- Where can I find samples of AUPs?
- What are some timely, relevant, and useful resources pertaining to the use of digital media for learning?

**Award badges for meaningful participation in connected learning events and activities. Create your own badges or use those created by other CEM participants as models. For examples used for connected learning, see the [badge catalog](#) on the CEM website. [The Connected Educator Starter Kit](#) has examples of badges that can be used beyond CEM and includes definitions of criteria for awarding and earning these badges.**

F

**Eric Sheninger**, principal at New Milford High School, announced the integration of digital badges into New Milford’s professional learning system, using a new platform called [Worlds of Learning](#).

**Al Byers**, assistant executive director of government partnerships and e-learning, National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), described NSTA’s use of digital badges to award credit for participation. For details, view his [blog post](#). He observed: "At NSTA, we are experimenting with points, badges that document online activity and learning, that districts then ascribe value to (where administrators can see all the activity and learning). Value then ‘converts’ to release time, money, control of where they consume learning, etc." For examples of badges with which NSTA is currently experimenting, see [http://learningcenter.nsta.org/help/activity\\_awards.aspx](http://learningcenter.nsta.org/help/activity_awards.aspx)

**Use digital portfolios to document professional learning—both informal and formal—to award credit and plan future learning.**

G

**Pam Moran**, superintendent of Albemarle County Public Schools in Virginia, explained that her district uses portfolios to help teachers document informal activities in which they are engaged, such as tweet streams and chats, and get credit for this type of work. For an example of how Albemarle has redesigned professional learning through seven pathways to performance learning goals, see <https://sites.google.com/site/acpsdesign2015/>

# 2

## INTEGRATE ONLINE AND CONNECTED LEARNING WITH ONGOING FACE-TO-FACE AND FORMAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, ALIGNED WITH IMPROVEMENT GOALS

There are many ways to improve the professional learning offered within a school or district, as the Professional Learning Readiness Self-Assessment Tool suggests. In their school improvement and professional learning plans, districts may deepen and extend the learning and thus further their organizations' progress toward their goals by conscientiously and systematically integrating connected learning. *The Professional Learning Strategies Self-Assessment Tool* and the *Online Professional Learning Quality Checklist* provide guidance for improving the quality and degree of connected learning across a system.

The following are strategies for integrating informal connected learning into formal professional learning plans aligned to improvement goals.



**Encourage staff members to create personal learning networks (PLNs) that support their individual learning goals that are aligned with district or school improvement goals.**

Encourage educators to begin building their PLNs with generally reliable sources, such as those listed in the [CEM Getting Started Guide](#). Make clear that a PLN is a source of personal opinions and diverse perspectives, and educators should critically evaluate information accessed through their PLNs.

**Pam Moran** noted that Joyce and Showers found “most professional development results in less than 10 percent transfer into practice. The PLN—personal learning network—sustains educators daily, 24/7, on their own time. I see immediate transfer over and over again via connectivity.”

*“It's not a school learning network, it's a personal learning network... You've got to find ways to provide them...the hooks to give them that personal experience so then they can start moving along that path.”*

- Steve Dembo, online community manager, Discovery Education

**Michelle Nebel**, district instructional coach at Excelsior Springs School District in Missouri, observed that “during our face-to-face formal professional development sessions, we use social media for making the learning visible across the district for staff attending other sessions and then find ways to share the information with people who are not using that tool.”

**B Collaborative action research** is a wonderful way to create collective efficacy in your schools and to engage school teams in practical research on a school improvement goal.

The **Making it Count Connected Educators blog** has highlighted several examples of teacher collaboration: [IDEO’s Creative Confidence Challenge](#) engages teachers in an open design thinking process on their OpenIDEO platform; An Estuary engages teachers in [collaborative action research](#) using Sanderling, a mobile field journal application; and [LearnZillion](#) shares how it is organizing teachers to produce high-quality, standard-aligned learning materials for use across the United States.

**C Use authentic and varied measures** to discover the value of connected learning in relation to district and school improvement goals.

*“While the need for measurable results is important, I think we obsess about ‘evidence’ and the need for an immediate rise in test scores. Perhaps we are overlooking the fact that education and connected networking is about relationships and personal efficacy. Much like the implementation cycle of technology, it is impractical to look for immediate change and improvements when we know change is a multifaceted, incremental process. That said, meaningful ways to assess whether educators are finding value in connected learning could include pre/post surveys, teacher interviews, reflecting on practice through journaling/blogging, etc. Are they growing as professionals as a result of their connected learning? If so, the organization benefits.”*

- [Lyn Hilt](#), elementary instructional technology integrator/coach and former K-6 principal, Eastern Lancaster County School District

# 3

## CONNECT WITH OTHER NETWORKS AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY

Districts that have made the culture shift to embrace connected learning and have effectively integrated it with formal professional learning aligned with improvement goals are best positioned to reap the benefits of connecting with other networks beyond their district. District leaders can help identify networks and communities that are interested in collaborating beyond their district—for example, connecting with professional organizations and initiatives at the state, national, and even international levels.

The following are strategies for connecting with other networks and communities across the state, nation, and world.

- A** **Host a Twitter hashtag chat related to a topic aligned with your district’s learning goals.** You may also want to reach out to other districts that have similar improvement goals and are ready to collaborate with communities. One way to locate other communities is to use the search function of the [CEM Community Directory](#) and review their descriptions.
- B** **Put an intentional focus on global outreach and collaboration** as a means to learning. Help your faculty and students learn to create personal learning networks of their own that comprise subject-matter experts and authentic connections to making curriculum come alive.
- C** **Reach out to other districts** in your region or state whose goals are aligned with yours, and consider sharing the responsibility for creating and sharing professional learning resources.

For a detailed account of how Gaston School District in Oregon collaborated with other districts in its region and harnessed technologies to create greater access to professional learning resources, even though professional learning budgets dwindled, read Joellen Killion’s [Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Tapping Technology to Enhance Professional Learning](#) (2013), published by Learning Forward.

- D** **Foster leadership** in your organization by providing forums within your district’s educator community to share what teachers and administrators are learning through collaboration in national and international communities and networks.
- E** **Encourage your instructors to become teacherpreneurs and to collaborate with other educators nationally**, around an area of focus, by actively engaging with a national online community of practice or through other collaborative online platforms.

As teacherpreneurs, teachers lead without leaving the classroom by devoting some of their time (sometimes with external funding) to work on policy advocacy, community engagement, and educational innovation while continuing to teach. For an example of a national online community of practice, see the Center for Teacher Quality’s (CTQ) [Collaboratory](#). For more details, watch CTQ’s [new video](#) about this community.

In the CEM webinar “[It’s a Small World: Elementary Global Collaboration](#),” educational consultant Nancye Blair Black demonstrated how elementary students can be blogging; digital storytelling; sharing videos, images, knowledge, or skills; and even creating websites with other students across the classroom and around the world.

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