By Janet K. Neufeld

Streamline Your PD

Support evidence-based practice in the classroom with a professional development management system.

Nine years ago, my district was mired in paperwork. We spent countless hours tracking the professional learning of all staff with paper and pencil, and that got us wondering if there was an easier and more efficient way to plan, manage, and evaluate the effects of all the professional learning opportunities we were working so hard to facilitate. We learned that professional development management systems (PDMS) could support our district's learning journey by not only tracking our learning activities, including approvals, registration, hours, and credits, but also creating a seamless system to align our district, school, educator, and student goals and outcomes.

I found about five or six systems that had extensive tools and possibilities for customization. We wanted a tool with comprehensive features, customization capability, and a complete set of student impact assessment tools. We also wanted a system that would allow us to grow and customize our professional learning and appraisal process as we became more skilled users.

Most systems are licensed according to the needs of the district and its size, and many provide several layers of service with licensing. We chose a system called MyLearningPlan. Pricing for this system consisted of a one-time configuration fee and a $10 annual licensing fee per user. (For details, visit www.mylearningplan.com.)

In previous years as a teacher, counselor, and administrator, I was confused about reporting my PD hours when moving from one position to another and from one district to another. When I was required to send in my hours to receive my license or to renew it, I had to follow a cumbersome process that involved collecting all the forms, making copies, and then ensuring they had the right signatures. We found that a good PDMS helped us manage this process more easily.

One of the larger shifts in education is evaluating our knowledge acquisition to determine if it is effectively changing the way we learn, teach, and bring about student improvement. In our effort to do this, we were spending much of our time on administrative duties, such as documenting what classes or workshops we had taken, and this often took time away from more important tasks, such as capturing what individual learning occurred and how we applied that learning in the classroom.

Features and Customization

What we needed was a system that offered features that went beyond simply managing enrollment in our PD program. I found that a robust PDMS would allow us to plan, manage, and evaluate the impact of a district's internal and external professional learning experiences and more.

With a high-quality PDMS, you can plan professional learning with online surveys for needs assessments; create mentor, professional learning community, school, and district learning plans; and align specific experiences to those plans to assist with reporting. In addition to planning, a PDMS can manage your initiatives by posting professional learning offerings in an online catalog, so educators can enroll, track hours and credits, and log action plans and outcomes through mentor and professional learning interactions. Having an online collaboration feature within the PDMS supports team-based threaded discussions and file sharing between or in place of face-to-face sessions.

The system should easily manage both in-district and out-of-district professional learning experiences. The PDMS should be highly customizable, manage site-based learning, and include a suite of tools for evaluating effectiveness. MyLearningPlan did not charge us for customization, but be aware that other providers may assess a fee.

It is important to remember that our professional learning can only affect student learning in the classroom if we evaluate it in terms of changes in teacher practice and student outcomes. A high-quality PDMS allows you to create and customize evaluation/reflection and application forms to capture teachers' intent to change their practice based on applying new learning in the classroom as well as the actual results. This is how PD programs create new learning and help us apply new skills. As in all new learning, sometimes the first step feels a little awkward as we facilitate and model new processes and techniques, but a PDMS can shorten that learning curve.

The user interface must be comprehensive and user friendly. As you begin to explore different PDMS options, first determine your must-have criteria. Ask PDMS vendors how long they've been providing service to school districts, ask about their upgrade policies, and get details about customer support. Remember, tech support is just as important in the long term as it is during the rollout.

You must make certain the system will help you evaluate the effect of PD in addition to tracking hours and credits. Be sure to speak with other districts or connect with educator listservs to learn about vendors that others use and how they would rate the quality of customer service and support. From those questions, identify user groups in your area that use the same PDMS to pick up tips and tricks about similar systems.

Implementation

After you've made your selection, enlist stakeholders from across departments to help develop a shared understanding of what a PDMS does and how it will help the district. For example, you must make collaborative determinations about how you will incorporate historical data. You will need

to thoughtfully gather, create, and review learning materials and resources to develop comprehensive professional learning plans and to figure out how you'll use other configurable parts of the system. After you have done this, identify key milestones, including the date when all workflow and processes happen online.

Benefits

As you implement your PDMS, you'll start to see benefits at many levels. Students learn from and with teachers who apply practices that have been shown to improve student achievement based on evidence collected in the PDMS. Teachers can easily track their own hours/credits for recertification, salary movement, and teaching status. The result is a dynamic portfolio of all of their formal and informal learning in one place, and they have a forum for engaging in online collaborative dialogue with colleagues.

Building leaders benefit by easily reviewing professional learning requests online. Principals are able to stay on top of what staff is learning to guide leadership conversations based on data. And learning leaders can identify which kinds of professional development have an impact so they can replicate and scale those approaches.

Central office administrators can save time and money using an online PDMS instead of paper and pencil methods. The PDMS allows a district to collect and analyze data from surveys, evaluation forms, and myriad reports to inform accurate and timely decision making and to track financial expenditures by budget code.

Our PDMS has allowed me to align my professional learning requests to our district's strategic goals, around student outcomes, and my own personal learning goals. As a district leader, I recognize that my role has shifted from providing professional development to

creating structures and a culture that supports job-embedded professional learning with the school as the hub and our PDMS as our partner in that work.

Learning Plans

At the conclusion of a learning event, I complete an electronic reflection form in MyLearningPlan, documenting what I learned as well as my plans for applying that learning in my practice and my expected outcomes in terms of my work's effect on teacher practice and student learning.

I also used the system to pilot a new professional learning measures tool. As principals gather data from the tool, they use this information to create annual learning plans for each building. The plan is the formative process within the PDMS that allows us to incorporate student and educator learning needs as well as evaluation measures into a comprehensive plan that ultimately shapes the learning designs that

guide the growth of leaders and faculty.

We created our template for the plan using the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (www. learningforward.org). The plan makes use of reflection, data, and discovery to capture evidence of the outcomes and document how leaders plan and implement professional learning in each building. The planning process also leads to greater efficiency in prioritizing the resources we need to fund, scale, and replicate desired results.

Ongoing Learning and Growth

After integrating an online educator evaluation management system, our district is now comprehensively planning, managing, and evaluating the impact of our professional learning initiatives while easily managing the whole educator appraisal process. Our use of this tool plus the PDMS forms a complete and integrated cycle of ongoing educator learning and

growth. The technology facilitates staff reflection and tracks how teachers are applying new knowledge and skills in their teaching. It then collects evidence of effectiveness in terms of changes in teacher practice and student learning.

The role of "external assistance," such as conference participation and technology solutions, becomes clearly delineated and focused with these tools. To further support our site-based learning, we are also piloting a learning walkthrough tool using a feature within our online educator evaluation management system. We use the forms and workflow in this system to manage our standard appraisal process, in addition to providing regular feedback and targeted professional learning throughout the year.

Our technology systems have not only enabled meaningful professional learning, but also have been the catalyst for cultural changes, as our teachers are now seeking connections

between their own learning and classroom application and student results.

In a time when we must make stronger and more visible connections between educator learning and student learning, a PDMS enabled my district to save time and money while ensuring that our professional learning expenditures were highly focused on the adult learning experiences that make a difference. In these lean times, I know that we're all interested in using technology to maximize limited dollars by providing data about what kind of professional learning is having an effect. By doing this, we have identified what specific teacher learning opportunities and structures we should fully support to increase student learning.

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