

Leading professional learning in schools

Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Strength of evidence
Promising	Mixed	Weak

What is it?

Leading professional learning (PL) is about creating the conditions for staff to grow continuously. It goes beyond organising training sessions and instead treats development as part of daily school life, where learning is embedded, revisited, and sustained over time.

The form this takes often depends on the setting. In primary schools, leaders may hold responsibility across several subjects or a whole phase, which means professional learning is often part of a broader leadership portfolio. In secondary schools, teachers are more likely to identify as subject specialists, with professional learning commonly led both at senior leader level from a whole-school perspective and by heads of department, where it is focused on subject knowledge and pedagogy. Across settings, professional learning is most effective when senior and middle leaders are aligned around shared priorities and have a clear understanding of staff needs.

Recognising these differences and ensuring leadership coherence helps schools design professional learning that is relevant, practical, and responsive to their context.

Key findings

Impact on teachers

Evidence suggests that how PL is led can shape teacher effectiveness. Teachers are more likely to engage when professional learning is well designed, relevant to their practice, and facilitated by people familiar with the school setting. Reported benefits include:

- **Greater confidence:** Teachers often feel more capable when PL is purposeful and supported by trusted leaders.
- **Stronger professional identity:** Leadership that connects PL to shared values can help staff see themselves as part of a professional learning community.
- **Improved collaboration:** Well-led PL can encourage more teamwork and knowledge exchange.

These findings are drawn mainly from self-reports rather than rigorous, evaluated measures, and leadership competencies such as decision-making and cultural adaptability appear to influence whether gains are sustained.

While, instinctively, it may feel obvious that PL leadership should support teacher growth, more robust evidence is needed to understand its lasting effects, including on teacher retention.

Impact on pupils

The evidence on whether PL leadership improves pupil outcomes is limited. Few studies measure pupil progress directly, and most effects are indirect, often inferred from teacher reports rather than measured outcomes. Current research indicates that there is little robust evidence on how PL leadership translates into sustained improvements in pupil learning.

While PL leadership may support pupil outcomes indirectly, by improving teaching quality or curriculum planning, particularly in subjects such as science more robust, long-term studies are needed to establish its full impact.

Even well-designed PL models may struggle to deliver benefits for pupils without competent and adaptive leadership.

How effective is the approach?

The evidence provides a limited but useful picture of how PL leadership may support school improvement. Much of what we know comes from teacher feedback and descriptive studies, which offer valuable insights into professional experience but do not establish clear cause and effect.

Leadership competencies appear to matter. When leaders show adaptability, cultural awareness, and sound decision-making, professional learning is more likely to be effective. Teachers also report higher engagement and stronger collaboration when PL is well led, with clearer links to curriculum planning.

Impact seems greatest when professional learning is embedded in daily routines and supported by middle leaders, rather than being treated as an optional add-on. However, direct evidence of impact on pupils is not reported, and teacher outcomes are mixed, with benefits often tied to the quality of leadership and the way PL is implemented.

Overall, the strength of evidence in this area is rated as strong, giving confidence in the findings that leadership plays a critical role in shaping PL. Yet more research would be valuable to clarify how these leadership practices translate into consistent improvements for both teachers and pupils across different settings.

How to implement it well

Leading professional learning (PL) is about creating the conditions for staff to develop continuously. It goes beyond organising training sessions and instead treats PL as part of daily

school life. In short, it is the practice of intentionally shaping conditions, structures, and relationships that enable continuous staff development and school improvement.

Behaviours

Evidence suggests that effective leadership of professional learning often includes the following key components:

- **Professional identity:** Secondary school teachers, as subject specialists, often value PL that deepens subject knowledge and pedagogy. Primary teachers, who work more flexibly across the curriculum, may not always see themselves as subject experts and can require targeted support. Whole-school or cross-curricular PL can be useful in these settings, but leaders should also recognise the importance of strengthening subject knowledge where needed.
- **Distributed leadership:** Middle leaders guide team learning through coaching, modelling, or curriculum dialogue, supported by senior staff.
- **Embedding learning in routines:** Leaders may use meeting time, team structures, and collaborative planning to support staff development.
- **Culture and trust:** A safe environment for trial and error is important, with leaders modelling curiosity and reflective practice.
- **Capacity building:** Supporting mentors, coaches, and facilitators, while empowering middle leaders, can foster shared responsibility for growth.
- **Modelling learning:** When leaders participate in PL themselves, it signals that professional learning is an integral part of the role for everyone, rather than a bolt-on.
- **Developmental evaluation:** Approaches such as coaching, observation, or appraisal are most effective when focused on growth rather than compliance.

Contextual factors

The success of PL depends heavily on the climate in which it takes place, and leaders play a central role in shaping this environment. Research suggests several factors can make professional learning more purposeful and lasting:

- **Building trust:** Teachers are more likely to take risks and engage in reflective practice when they feel safe, especially in collaborative settings.
- **Subject knowledge:** Primary school teachers may need targeted PL in areas outside of their expertise, such as maths, science, or computing. Overall, secondary school teachers often seek deeper pedagogical strategies within their subject area.
- **Anticipating barriers:** Workload, scheduling, and planning pressures can dilute PL unless leaders plan carefully to manage these challenges.
- **Leadership roles:** In secondary schools, professional learning is often led by heads of department, usually shaping subject-specific development in line with wider whole-school priorities. In primary settings, leaders often hold broader responsibilities across subjects or phases, requiring different forms of support.
- **Tailoring to need, mentoring and induction:** Mentoring in secondary schools is typically subject-specific, while in primary it is broader and less formal. Leaders should adjust early career support accordingly. PL is most engaging when aligned with staff roles, subjects, or career stages, including targeted support for early career teachers.

- **Global trends:** International evidence highlights the growth of collaborative models, digital learning, and diversity-focused training, though poor planning and workload pressures can reduce their impact.

The evidence suggests that PL is more likely to succeed when the school climate fosters trust, ensures relevance, and aligns with wider institutional priorities.

Structured but flexible

Strong PL leadership appears most effective when it combines clear systems with space for staff to adapt and lead their own learning. Research highlights several practices that support this balance:

- **Embedding collaboration:** Practices such as peer coaching or inquiry cycles are more powerful when they are part of regular routines rather than delivered as one-off events.
- **Balancing structure with autonomy:** Flexible frameworks encourage ownership by allowing teachers to adapt ideas to their subject or setting.
- **Responding to feedback:** Leaders who adjust PL design in response to staff input are better able to keep it relevant and meaningful.

This approach is not about lowering expectations but about creating a culture in which consistency and autonomy coexist, and where teachers feel trusted to lead their own professional growth.

Barriers to effective implementation

Even when PL is valued, systemic and cultural challenges may limit its impact. Reviews and recent guidance highlight several recurring barriers:

- **Unclear expectations for middle leaders:** Many are asked to lead PL without sufficient training, time, or clarity, which can result in inconsistency.
- **Compliance-driven approaches:** When PL is linked to inspection or appraisal, it may feel like box-ticking rather than purposeful professional learning.
- **Time pressures:** Without protected time or integration into daily routines, professional learning may be difficult to prioritise.

Leaders can mitigate these risks by seeking regular feedback, reviewing systems for capacity and support, and remaining adaptive as new challenges arise.

Other considerations

Beyond strategy and structure, a range of relational and contextual factors shapes how PL is led and experienced. These factors are as critical as formal strategy in determining the effectiveness of PL leadership. Evidence suggests that:

- **Valuing teacher expertise:** Engagement increases when PL reflects staff knowledge and offers some choice within clear frameworks.

- **Leading with empathy:** Trust and emotional intelligence shape how feedback and support are received, influencing whether change feels sustainable.
- **Balancing time horizons:** Protecting time for both short-term wins and longer-term initiatives helps PL embed effectively.
- **Adapting to context:** Tailoring PL to staffing, workload, and community circumstances improves its relevance and impact.
- **Clarifying success:** Using both feedback and data to define and track improvement maintains focus and purpose over time.

Summary

Evidence suggests that leading professional learning can improve teaching when it is embedded in school culture, aligned with priorities, and built on trust. The strongest findings relate to teacher outcomes, while evidence on pupil learning remains limited.

- **Teacher benefits are clearer than pupil gains:** Reported improvements include greater confidence, stronger practice, and better engagement, particularly when middle leaders are supported and leadership competencies are evident.
- **Pupil outcomes remain uncertain:** Links to improved learning are possible but not well evidenced; most studies focus on teachers, with direct impacts on pupils less commonly measured.
- **Context shapes effectiveness:** Impact appears to vary by school phase and setting, and is more likely when professional learning is sustained, strategic, and supported by workload management, planning, and protected time.

Overall, the evidence base for the impact of effective leadership of professional learning is promising but uneven. Stronger long-term research, especially in primary schools, is needed to understand how leadership translates into lasting improvements in teaching and pupil outcomes.

When citing this strand, please use the following reference:

National Institute of Teaching (2026). NlOT Evidence Toolkit: Leading professional learning in schools strand

References

	Review	Years of research	Focus	# studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
1	Lipscombe et al. - (2023) School middle leadership: A systematic review	2006-2020	CPD only	35	Australia, Chile, China, England, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Sweden, UK, Wales	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
2	Martinez & McAbee (2020) School Administrator Support of Teachers: A Systematic Review (2000-2019)	2000-2019	CPD only	31	USA	Positive	Mixed	Excellent
3	Rai & Beresford-Dey (2023) - School leadership in the United Arab Emirates: A scoping review	2001-2021	CPD only	38	UAE	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
4	Camili et al. (2024) - Training for teacher professional development in schools: systematic review	2010–2021	CPD only	68	Australia, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Ecuador, Israel, Jordan, Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, UK, USA,	Not reported	Mixed	Medium

Review citations

Camilli Trujillo, C., Pastor Gil, L., Serrano Díaz, S., & Aymá González, L. (2024). Training for teacher professional development in schools: systematic review. *Revista De Educación*, 1(406), 203–231. <https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2024-406-643>

Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). School middle leadership: A systematic review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(2), 270–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220983328>

Martinez, J., & McAbee, S. (2020). School Administrator Support of Teachers: A Systematic Review (2000-2019). *Education Leadership Review*, 21(1), 230–254. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ej1279817>

Rai, J. & Beresford-Dey,(2023) M, School leadership in the United Arab Emirates: A scoping review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, Article 17411432231218129. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231218129>