



From Practice to Progress:

Empowering Educators Through Job-Embedded Learning

KARI MONTGOMERY
THE POSITIVE PRINCIPAL



Professional learning is _____. Fill in the blank! Important. Critical. Expensive. And so on and so on. Some of the best professional learning that impacts change is when teachers find it to be directly relevant and not just one more thing.

If we believe professional learning should be embedded in practice—not layered on top of it—then we have to design systems to create a culture where access to classrooms and teachers discussing practice are normal, safe, and sustainable.

Oftentimes, school leaders are eager to find a conference or a presenter who can help move their staff toward a new or different practice. I am not here to argue that these opportunities can be highly valuable. They absolutely can be. And, they are often expensive and therefore many districts or schools have to find other ways to support the professional growth of their educators.

In my opinion, the most powerful professional learning in schools doesn't come from a set of handouts, a slide deck, or even a conference stage. It comes from seeing real teaching and learning in action, reflecting together, and refining practice in real time.

Here are five ways school leaders can create meaningful learning from each other's classrooms—without overwhelming schedules or eroding trust.



1. Instructional Rounds (Problem-of-Practice Focused)

What it is:

A structured series of short classroom visits centered around a shared problem of practice. Observers collect evidence tied to a specific instructional focus—not related to teacher evaluation.

First, create a problem of practice. For example, a rich problem of practice that:

- focuses on the instructional core
- is directly observable
- is actionable
- connects to a broader strategy of improvement
- is high-leverage

“In short, the problem of practice is something that you care about that would make a difference for student learning if you improved it.”

*-Instructional Rounds;
City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel*

Next, design a Theory of Action - If students are engaged with the writing learning target, then the opportunities increase for students to demonstrate greater proficiency in writing.

List your Problem of Practice - What is the evidence that students are actively engaged with the writing learning target?

Brainstorm Examples & Possible Strategies to observe this: (What would you see?)

- I Can (student friendly learning targets) for Writing standard: both visual and oral
- Observing students using purposefully designed resources, tools and classroom systems
- Demonstration of the learning: collaboration, asking clarifying questions, metacognitive thinking indicators
- Orally: asking questions, making statements, metacognitive thinking, collaborating with peers
- Visually: using manipulatives, referring to anchor charts, highlighting text, using iPads, referencing notes, working on assignments

Here are a few implementation suggestions:

- Identify one clear, student-centered focus (e.g., academic discourse, formative assessment, cognitive lift).
- Keep visits brief (10–15 minutes per classroom).
- Use a simple evidence-collection tool aligned to the focus.
- Debrief using patterns and trends—not individual teacher commentary.
- Rotate host classrooms so participation is shared over time.
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The most crucial component is to protect the non-evaluative nature of these visits. This process is about learning, not judgment.

For more information on Instructional Rounds, [check out this article from Edutopia author Jorge Valanzuela](#).



2. Peer Learning Labs (Open Classroom Model)

What it is:

Best practice around peer learning labs would state that these are not a one and done; they serve our teachers needs best when they are part of a cycle of continuous inquiry. The magic happens when a volunteer teacher opens their classroom around a specific strategy or instructional goal, followed by structured reflection with colleagues.

Here are a few implementation suggestions:

- Invite teachers to host based on a strategy they are actively refining.
- Start with a pre-brief; share the instructional goal, expectations and provide focus ahead of time.
- Provide observers with “look-for” prompts or a graphic organizer to record their observations. For example:

What I Noticed in _____ Classroom		
WHAT <i>We saw and heard</i>	SO WHAT <i>Why does it matter for student understanding</i>	NO WHAT <i>What are the implications for my practice</i>

- Schedule a short facilitated reflection immediately after the lesson. Lead the group to share about their observations and implications for their own practice.
- Capture takeaways and next steps for participants. Have teachers set a goal for what they will try in their own classroom based on what they learned.
- Follow up! Check in with your teachers and find out how they stretched their practice. Did they get the results they anticipated? Why or why not?

It is important to frame this experience as shared learning—not showcasing perfection. The most powerful labs include real-time adjustments and honest reflection.

For more learning about Peer Learning Labs, take a look at [Annie Patterson and Timeri Tolnay's work linked here.](#)

3. Coverage Swap Days

What it is:

Sometimes coverage swap days are referred to as professional learning exchange days (PLED) and may be a part of your district's collective bargaining agreement. (Be sure to check!) These are days that are flexed so that grade-level or department teams can rotate coverage so teachers can observe each other during regular instructional blocks. Often less structured than instructional rounds or peer learning labs, coverage days can be used with or without the support of an instructional coach to help guide the observations and reflections post visit.

Here are a few implementation suggestions:

- Build observation windows into the building (master) schedule (even once per quarter).
- Pair teachers intentionally (new + experienced, cross-content, etc.).
- Provide substitute coverage or rotate internal coverage.
- Use a short reflection form to guide post-observation dialogue.
- Keep the focus narrow and purposeful.

Don't be afraid to start small. It can take time to shift culture and have teachers feel comfortable sharing their practice. Even two rotations per semester can shift culture significantly.



4. Micro-Observations (15-Minute Focused Walkthroughs)

What it is:

Short, targeted visits by colleagues centered on one instructional move or student behavior. If an instructional coach is available to support the observations and guide follow up conversations, that is ideal. However, a mentor teacher or building leader can also be an asset in implementation.

Here are a few implementation suggestions:

- Define one tight focus (e.g., questioning patterns, student talk time).
- Schedule quick visits during planning periods.
- Use a timer and stick to 10-15 minutes.
- Debrief within 24 hours.
- Encourage reciprocal visits.

One of the best ways to have success with this strategy for professional learning is to normalize frequency over length. Quick and consistent visits create more trust and buy-in than rare and elaborate orchestrations.

If you would like to learn more about micro-teaching and micro-observations, read [Micro-teaching: How Short Reflections Make a Big Difference by Sarah Findlater.](#)



5. Cross-Grade or Cross-Content Learning Walks

What it is:

Intentional observation across grade levels or departments to build vertical alignment and shared instructional language. The purpose is to learn and celebrate the practices and bright moments that are captured within a classroom. These snapshots can provide the spark to ignite productive and reflective conversations with educators.

Here are a few implementation suggestions:

- Align the learning walk to a school-wide initiative or instructional framework.
- Create mixed-grade observation groups. Be intentional and creative as you focus on what the teachers aspire to do or learn from this experience.
- Use a simple data collection tool tied to the goal. Be thinking of the following questions to guide the observations:
 - What do we hope to see the students doing?
 - What questions or prompts could help to define practices that may be subtle?
 - What are the artifacts in the learning environment we anticipate seeing?
- Debrief around student experience rather than teacher moves. The focus is on what the students are doing.
- Identify one actionable next step for each team. What is a takeaway that they are going to try?

When conversations are anchored in student evidence, the emphasis remains non-evaluative. Ask, “What were students doing, saying, thinking?” not “What was the teacher doing, saying, thinking?”.

For more information about learning walks, [check out Edutopia's video linked here.](#)

Some Final Thoughts

Perhaps the most important action to take when considering these job-embedded professional learning opportunities is to make a commitment and make it sustainable.

As we know, access alone does not improve practice. The practice of reflection does. To ensure you are building the foundation that can lead to growth, remember the following:

- Keep the focus on students.
- Protect psychological safety.
- Avoid compliance-driven implementation.
- Build observation cycles into existing PLC or collaboration time.
- Celebrate learning, not performance.

When we build a culture where teachers regularly see one another teach, and we normalize reflection as part of our craft, professional development stops being an event and becomes a critical ingredient of a healthy school culture.

And when classroom doors open, so does collective efficacy. 