

NEPF Professional Learning at a Rural High School

The Nevada Educator Performance Framework (NEPF), a statewide teacher evaluation system, has been in place for ten years. Since the initial bill (AB222) was passed requiring the use of NEPF for teacher evaluation, several revisions have been made pertaining to the use of the system; however, the five instructional standards and 19 indicators, solidly backed by research, have remained consistent.

Since the inception of the NEPF, the Northeastern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (NNRPDP) has promoted increased awareness and application of the standards and indicators with teachers across grade levels and content areas. Many forms of professional learning have been provided from a broad swath of short roll-out sessions to create initial awareness of the framework in districts and schools, to a year-long “Teacher Academy” where cohorts of teachers gathered to dive deeply into each standard, touching on the standards and indicators across a variety of professional learning sessions. These professional learning opportunities have focused on using the NEPF as a tool for teacher learning and growth rather than for evaluation purposes.

Once teachers have participated in these sorts of professional learning opportunities, they, and their administrators, often feel they have gained the knowledge necessary to transfer the standards and indicators into their instructional practice. However, working toward consensus around what good teaching looks like and enacting effective teaching practices in the classroom must be an ongoing process. The NEPF framework, with its research-based standards and indicators, provides a sound and consistent cornerstone for good pedagogical practices across content and grade levels.

Initial Data and Planning

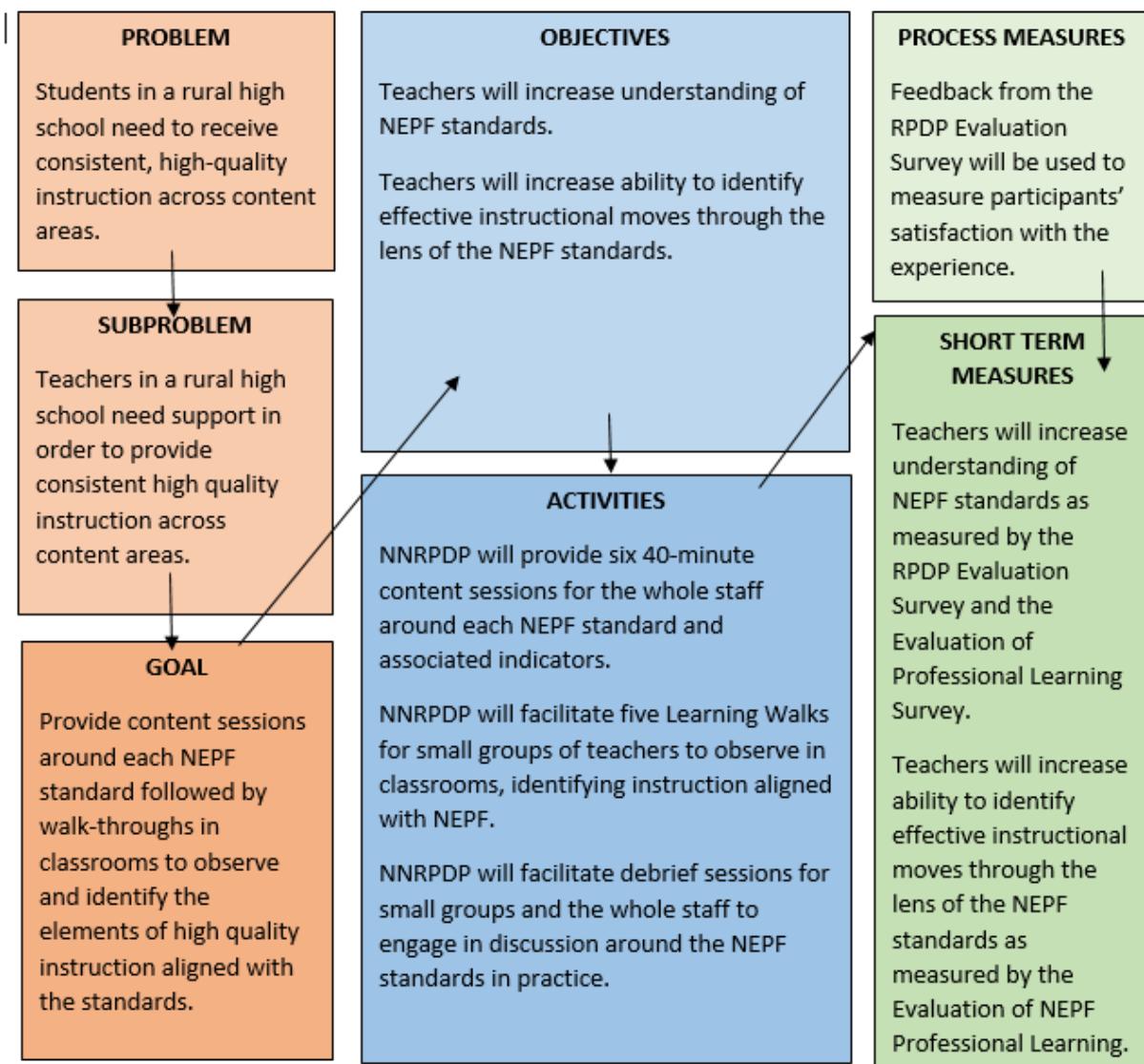
A rural Nevada high school with a teaching staff of 20 teachers hired four new teachers for the 2021-22 school year. Not only would the new teachers need support to assimilate to a new district and school, they would need support to effectively implement the Nevada Academic Content Standards (NVACS) for their content as well as support to understand and leverage the NEPF framework to ensure that content would be taught in the most effective ways. Administrators from this high school reached out to NNRPDP to discuss ways to support the new teachers.

Two NNRPDP coordinators who have been immersed in NEPF since its inception, and who have provided numerous professional learning opportunities for teachers across the region were chosen to work with the school. With the needs of the new teachers in mind, school administrators and NNRPDP chose to employ Learning Walks, a form of professional learning in which teachers are given the opportunity to briefly visit multiple classrooms reflecting on the teaching and learning using the NEPF standards and indicators as the observation tool. This

model of professional learning would provide ongoing opportunities for the teachers to see glimpses of every classroom in the school, of every teacher in the school, and of implementation, or lack of, NEPF standards across content areas and grade levels.

In the course of planning, it became clear that the Learning Walks could be as beneficial for veteran teachers as for new teachers. Veteran teachers, coming back from the disruption of COVID 19, needed to reconnect with one another, re-build collective efficacy, and refine their common understanding of effective teaching and learning. Several additional factors led to including the whole staff in the professional learning: 1) the veteran staff has a wide range of understanding and implementation of NEPF standards, 2) staff rarely have an opportunity to observe in each other's classrooms, a practice that builds community and trust among teachers as well as collective efficacy, and 3) having common experiences would lead to a more cohesive staff, rather than separating new from veteran teachers. The objectives for the professional learning are outlined in the following Logic Model.

Figure 1 NEPF Learning in a Rural High School Logic Model



Method

Learning Design

The learning design of this project was informed by Nevada's Standards for Professional Development (2017), the features of effective professional learning outlined by The Learning Policy Institute, and the research of Dr. John Murray (2014). A Professional Learning Plan (see Appendix T) was created that provides an overview of the learning design, objectives, designated roles and responsibilities, schedules, and alignment with Nevada's Standards for Professional Learning (2018). Based on a meta-analysis of the research, The Learning Policy Institute (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) found that effective professional development incorporates most or all of the following features: is content focused, incorporates active

learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration. The NEPF Learning Walks professional learning aligns with several of the features described. The learning design incorporates active learning providing a direct connection to classroom environments and practice. The learning design supports collaboration as teachers gather as a whole staff to build a common understanding of each NEPF standard and then as small groups engage in job-embedded contextual learning by participating in, and reflecting on Learning Walks in classrooms. The learning design uses models of effective practice. Teachers viewed and analyzed classroom video during content sessions and observed and discussed classroom practice in their own school. Rather than a one-and-done session, the learning design is of sustained duration taking place over several months with time devoted to both content and classroom connections.

Additionally, the learning design aligns with elements of effective professional development outlined by Murray (2014). The learning design is contextual in that it applies to the daily work of all teachers. It is focused and aligned with the goals of the school. The learning design is open and accessible to all teachers, giving all teachers the opportunity for “ongoing sharing and examination of instructional practices” (p. 14). The Professional Learning (PL) was specifically designed with these three elements in mind.

Participants and Procedure

A group of 24 diverse educators participated in the professional learning including administrators and teachers of core classes (ELA, math, science, social studies), special education, career and technical education, music, PE, and computer science. Of these participants, four were new teachers. These teachers serve a diverse population of just over 300 students in grades nine through twelve with nearly three quarters Hispanic, a quarter white, and a small percentage of American Indians and Asians. Approximately 10% of the students receive special education services and over 70% are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Nevada Report Card, 2022).

The intervention included two main components:

1. A series of six whole group content sessions including an overview of NEPF and a session devoted to each of the five standards and accompanying indicators.
2. A series of five Learning Walks following content sessions where small groups of teachers observed in various classrooms noting alignment with NEPF standards and indicators. Learning Walks consist of three parts: 1) a pre-walk discussion with the small group participating to review agreed-upon observation protocols, 2) the learning walk itself where the group observes in multiple classrooms for short periods of time (less than 30 minutes), and 3) a debrief in which the group shares observations and implications for their own practice. See the table below for a schedule.

Table 1 Professional Learning Schedule

Focus	Content Session	Learning Walk (Small groups during prep period)
NEPF Overview	9.13 (via Zoom)	No learning walks for overview
NEPF Standard 1	9.15	9.16
NEPF Standard 2	10.6	10.7
NEPF Standard 3	10.20	10.21
NEPF Standard 4	Week of 11.3 (asynchronous)	11.8
NEPF Standard 5	11.18 (via Zoom)	11.22 + final whole-staff debrief

Measurement

The desired impact of the NEPF Learning Walks is to increase student achievement by receiving consistent, high-quality instruction across content areas. To lead to the desired student impact, which is not measured in this project, the goal is to provide job-embedded professional learning focused on NEPF standards.

Qualitative and quantitative measurements were used to assess the two objectives of the professional learning which are:

1. Teachers will increase understanding of NEPF standards as measured by the RPDP Evaluation Survey (Appendix B) and the Evaluation of Professional Learning Survey (Appendix I).
2. Teachers will increase their ability to identify effective instructional moves through the lens of the NEPF standards as measured by the Evaluation of Professional Learning Survey (Appendix I).

Table 2 Five Levels of Professional Development Evaluation (Guskey, 2002)

Evaluation Level	Questions Addressed	How will Information Be Gathered?	What is Measured or Assessed?	How Will Information Be Used?
1. Participants' Reactions	<i>Training expectations, presenter skills, increased knowledge, motivation to improve</i>	<i>RPDP Evaluation Survey</i>	<i>Participants' satisfaction with the experience</i>	<i>To improve program design and delivery</i>
2. Participants' Learning	<i>Did participants acquire the intended knowledge and skills?</i>	<i>RPDP Evaluation Survey</i>	<i>Increased knowledge and understanding around NEPF</i>	<i>To improve program content,</i>

Evaluation Level	Questions Addressed	How will Information Be Gathered?	What is Measured or Assessed?	How Will Information Be Used?
		<i>Evaluation of NEPF Professional Learning</i>	<i>standards and indicators</i>	<i>format, and organization</i>
3. Organization Support and Change	<i>Was implementation advocated, facilitated, and supported? Was the support public and overt? Were problems addressed quickly and efficiently? Were sufficient resources made available? Were successes recognized and shared? What was the impact on the organization's climate and procedures?</i>	PLP Agendas Planning meetings with admin	<i>Organization's advocacy, support, accommodation, facilitation, and recognition</i>	<i>To document and improve organization support</i> <i>To inform future change efforts</i>
4. Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills	<i>Did participants effectively apply the new knowledge and skills?</i>	RPDP Evaluation Survey	<i>Participants' perception of application of learning</i>	
5. Student Learning Outcomes	<i>What was the impact on students? Did it affect student performance or achievement?</i>	RPDP Evaluation Survey	<i>Perceived impact on student learning</i>	<i>To document impact on students' growth and achievement</i>

Results

Participants completed the RPDP Evaluation Survey (Appendix B) during the course of the professional learning. Participants completed the Evaluation of Professional Learning Survey

(Appendix I) at the end of the year. Alignment with Guskey's levels of professional development are outlined below.

Participants' Satisfaction

Level one of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses participants' satisfaction with the learning. On the RPDP Evaluation Survey, 100% of participants indicated that the professional learning matched their needs and 100% indicated that the presenters' experience and expertise enhanced the quality of the training. Textual analysis of the reflections and feedback portion of the RPDP Evaluation Survey showed that 100% of the comments were positive, several of which are included below:

- *Valuable, reflective, and important!*
- *I actually am enjoying the discussions we have on improving lessons without criticizing our fellow teachers.*
- *Great presentation and teacher walk-throughs.*

Participants' Learning Through Increased Understanding of NEPF Standards

Level two of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses participants' learning, in this case, participants' increased understanding of the NEPF standards. On the RPDP Evaluation Survey (Appendix B), the statement, *This training added to my knowledge of standards and/or my skills in teaching subject matter content*, received a mean rating of 4.6 on a scale of 1 - 5, where a rating of one indicated *not at all* and a rating of five indicated *to a great extent* (n = 19). On the Evaluation of Professional Learning Survey, the statement, *as a result of the NEPF professional learning, rank your understanding of the NEPF standards*, showed a mean rating of 4.3 on a scale of 1 - 5 where a rating of one indicated *very little understanding* and a rating of five indicated *a high level of understanding* (n=14). Example participant comments are shown below:

- *Always good - always learning something new*
- *Learning is a continuous process. You can learn from others and they will learn also from you.*

A comparison of how participants thought about their level of learning during the professional learning and at the end of the year on two surveys is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Participants' Level of Understanding of NEPF Standards

Rating 5 = high level of understanding 1 = little or no understanding	RPDP Evaluation Survey (given in the midst of the professional learning)	Evaluation of NEPF Professional Learning Survey (given at the end of the year)
5	65%	43%
4	30%	43%
3	5%	14%
2	0	0
1	0	0

Participants' Learning Through Increased Ability to Identify Effective Instructional Moves Through the Lens of the NEPF Standards

Level two of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses participants' learning, in this case, participants' increased ability to identify effective instructional moves through the lens of the NEPF standards. On the Evaluation of NEPF Professional Learning Survey (Appendix I), the statement, *as a result of the professional learning, how confident are you in your ability to identify high-quality instruction aligned with NEPF?* showed that 92% of participants ranked the statement with a four or five on a scale of one to five where a rating of one indicated *not at all confident* and a rating of five indicated *very confident* (n=14). Example participant comments are shown below:

- *I have a better idea of what high quality instruction that aligns with NEPF looks like...*
- *It gave me a different perspective of how my students react, interact and collaborate in other classrooms. It also allowed us to grow as a staff and see the importance of having a shared vision and goal when it came to implementing NEPF standards.*

Table 4 Participants' Confidence in Ability to Identify High-Quality Instruction Aligned to NEPF

Rating 5 = high level of understanding 1 = little or no understanding	Evaluation of NEPF Professional Learning Survey (given at the end of the year)
5	50%
4	42%
3	7%
2	0%
1	0%

Organization Support

Level 3 of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses organization support. This was measured through adherence to the Professional Learning Plan (Appendix T) created prior to the project. Administrators supported the plan through clear and consistent communication to teachers before and during the learning. They arranged schedules to help alleviate additional burden on teachers and made necessary adjustments. Administrators also attended and participated in all content sessions. Informal measures such as session agendas, planning meetings, and attendance and participant debrief sessions were also considered.

Participants' Perceived Application of New Learning

Level 4 of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses participants' application of new learning. The RPDP Evaluation Survey statement, *I will use the knowledge and skills from this training in my classroom* showed a mean rating of 4.8 on a scale of 1 - 5, here a rating of one indicated *not at all* and a rating of five indicated *to a great extent* (n = 19).

Participants' Perceived Impact on Student Learning

Level 5 of Guskey's evaluation of professional development assesses impact on student learning. On the RPDP Evaluation Survey statement, *My learning today will affect students' learning*, showed a mean rating of 4.5 on a scale of 1 - 5, where rating of one indicated *not at all* and a rating of five indicated *to a great extent* (n = 19).

Discussion

The objectives of the NEPF PL were to 1) increase teacher understanding of the NEPF and 2) to help teachers increase their ability to identify high-quality instruction aligned to NEPF. Analysis of the evidence suggests that the objectives of the NEPF PL were met.

Participants' Satisfaction

While the survey data shows that teachers felt the professional learning matched their needs, that there were opportunities for interactions and reflections, and that the presenters' expertise and experience enhanced the quality of the training, satisfaction with the experience was evidenced in other ways as well. A collaborative energy and camaraderie and a new perspective came from seeing the school as a whole -- the students, the teachers, the classrooms, the learning. Teachers who are often disgruntled came to the sessions and participated enthusiastically.

Participants' Learning Through Increased Understanding of NEPF Standards

Participants' perception of increased learning, as evidenced on the survey, was high. Over the course of the professional learning, discourse among the teachers became less general and instead became more focused on specific ways of implementing the NEPF standards (Appendix J).

Participants' Learning Through Increased Ability to Identify Effective Instructional Moves Through the Lens of the NEPF Standards

The survey showed that participants' perception of their ability to identify effective instruction was high. Facilitators' observations confirm that teachers did indeed become more adept at analyzing the effectiveness of instruction. However, Learning Walks are only a first step to build a common understanding of effective teaching moves and are not designed to critique teaching. In order to build trust and community, facilitators were careful to focus on the positive things happening in classrooms.

Organization Support

When administrators approached the staff with the professional learning plan to participate in Learning Walks focused on the NEPF standards (Appendix J), there were varying responses. This was the second year of schooling disrupted by COVID 19 and, while students were back in school, the difficulties of tracking cases and quarantining students was proving to be more challenging than anticipated. However, teachers willingly agreed to participate despite reservations. Originally, the plan was to complete the series of content and Learning Walks in six weeks, but after the first two consecutive Learning Walks in two weeks, teachers expressed concern about the pace of the learning. Administrators responded by slowing things down, extending the professional learning over two months. Time is often the biggest obstacle to implementing professional learning and administrators faced that hurdle by creating a schedule where teachers with the same prep period participated in Learning Walks during that hour. To compensate for their time, teachers were allowed to leave early on designated days.

Participants' Perceived Application of New Learning

Participants' perception of application of their learning was measured on two survey statements: one determining whether the training prompted them to change their practice, and one determining whether their learning would affect students' learning. While the mean scores were above four out of five, they were the lowest on the survey. The survey indicated that teachers were satisfied with the experience and they felt they learned; however, there was not a clear correlation between teacher learning, changed practice, and an impact on student learning. This suggests that perhaps teachers lacked a sense of the overarching goals above and beyond the objectives of the professional learning -- to change practice in order to increase student achievement.

Participants' Perceived Impact on Student Learning

While this professional learning did not measure the impact on student learning, participants' perception of impact on student learning was high. If the school were to do another similar cycle of learning, measuring the impact on student learning could be an additional component.

Conclusions

The findings from analysis of the evidence collected suggest that NEPF professional learning at this high school worked well, particularly in light of the unusual and difficult year related to COVID-19. Teachers were back after a year of not being in school and engaging with one another, and this professional learning fulfilled a need to connect. Even in a small, rural school, teachers on one side of the building often don't see those on the other side of the building for days or even weeks and many had never been in each other's classrooms despite having worked at the school together for years. These factors, along with the need to assimilate new teachers to the school, made Learning Walks a good choice for professional learning.

Ideally, Learning Walks would be a first step for teachers to begin to develop a common understanding of the effective teaching practices described in the NEPF standards (Appendix J), to begin building a true learning community and de-privatizing practice by observing other classrooms and engaging in the deep analysis of teaching and learning necessary to promote change. Possible areas of revision and improvement, as indicated by participant responses, include facilitators intentionally supporting teachers to make the connection between the objectives of the professional learning, their changed practice, and positive impact on student achievement. Additionally, a pre-post assessment for students with a focus on NEPF Standard 4 would provide insight as to whether students are benefiting from changed teacher practice.

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