Under the auspices of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), Judith Langer’s Excellence in English project is working to identify the features that distinguish schools in which students “beat the odds” to literacy achievement beyond that achieved by peers in comparable schools. One of these hallmarks is professional context — the conditions that surround teachers’ professional lives in the school and district setting.

Although there are dedicated, caring teachers in all schools and districts, some program policies and school cultures can impede or discourage the development of professional knowledge and practice. Yet Langer has found that student achievement is higher in schools and districts that nurture the professional lives of teachers.

Professional contexts: six essential features for student achievement

1. **Effective schools orchestrate coordinated efforts to improve student achievement.** Teachers and administrators work closely to articulate standards and goals. These professionals ensure that accountability measures and standards and goals are addressed in the day-to-day instructional program. These goals reverberate from class to class and grade to grade.

   In typical schools, individual teachers and departments make isolated decisions based on a range of factors including available materials, popular topics, and familiar ways to teach. Mechanisms that encourage coordination across classes and grades lack support or are absent.

2. **Effective schools foster teacher participation in a variety of professional communities where ideas for enacting educational improvement can grow.** Being dedicated to the classroom is not enough. Teachers are encouraged and supported to participate in at least some of the following: school, district, regional, state, and national curriculum development groups, committees and organizations.

   In typical schools, professional communities are virtually absent. Even when school and district groups are formed, they lack essential elements that make them work. Resources to support teacher participation in out-of-school activities are often lacking.
Professional contexts: six essential features for student achievement

3 **Effective schools provide teachers with a sense of agency.** In an ongoing effort toward structured improvement, teachers actively review test scores, assess needs, research solutions, and recommend change. They are a part of goal-directed, decision-making teams.

In typical schools, teachers have little sense of agency. Even when they work toward change, their recommendations are rarely supported. Professional development programs deliver services to teachers, rather than having teachers actively determine their own needs.

4 **In effective schools, individual commitments to the profession of teaching are valued.** Teachers behave professionally, are well informed about their respective fields, and continually hone their own skills. Mentoring, curriculum writing, and team planning are common practices.

Typical schools and districts give neither overt nor implied expectations regarding teachers’ commitment to their profession, aside from their classroom duties.

5 **Effective schools express explicit, caring attitudes that extend to colleagues and students.** These attitudes gain strength through behaviors and activities such as small courtesies, frequent positive reinforcement, family conferences before problems escalate, active voluntarism, and conscientious role modeling.

Typical schools are cordial and respectful places but lack a deeply caring atmosphere and unified sense of community.

6 **Effective schools foster a deep respect for lifelong learning.** Teachers and students share the identity of learner and engage in discussions of learning, with a range of technology and media. They also undertake activities that advance their learning and knowledge both in and out of school.

Typical schools do not make teachers’ learning overt, nor provide students with opportunities to see adults enthusiastically involved as learners.