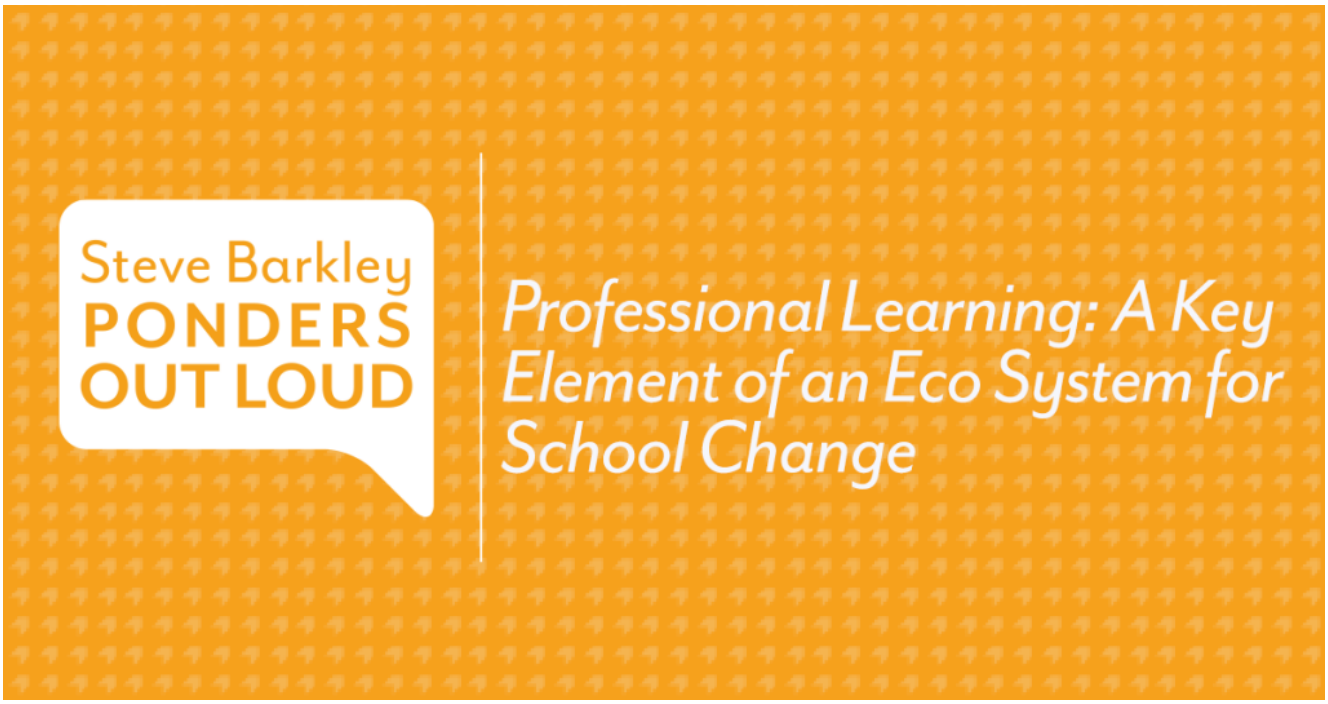
Podcast: Professional Learning – A Key Element of an Eco System for School Change



If professional learning for educators is going to generate increased learning success for students, it needs to be an environment, not an event. Dr. Marisa Ramirez Stukey, co-author of, "**Professional Learning Redefined: An Evidence-Based Guide**," shares key elements of effective professional learning and the necessary commitments needed from administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers.

Visit The Reading League website and get in touch with Dr. Stukey here.

Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As

instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.800] – Steve
Professional learning: A Key Element of an Ecosystem for School Change. Today, our guest is Dr. Marisa Ramirez Stukey, the Chief Academic Officer for the Reading League and Content Editor for the Reading League Press. In these roles, she leads academic strategy, and professional learning initiatives while overseeing the development of high-quality content aligned with the science of reading to advance evidence-based literacy instruction nationwide. Marisa has served as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, higher education instructor, and consultant. She is nationally recognized as an expert in literacy, professional learning, and systems change, centering her work on designing professional learning systems that integrate the science of learning with effective reading instruction. She is also the co-author of, "Professional Learning Redefined: An Evidence-Based Guide." Welcome, Marisa.

[00:01:46.180] – Dr. Stukey
Thank you, Steve. I'm so excited to spend some time with you.

[00:01:49.880] – Steve
Well, I appreciate you being here. When we had spoken prior to recording the podcast, you talked about an ecosystem that would support school change. Describe a little bit what you mean by an ecosystem.

[00:02:04.670] – Dr. Stukey
Yeah, I really use that framing very intentionally because I really want to push back on the idea that professional learning is an event. It's really an environment that you have to design and sustain over time. And I think it's because so

much of the dominant model for so long has been doing PD to teachers, not building the conditions for teacher learning. And so when we talk about this idea of an ecosystem, it's really talking about everything being interdependent, right? The content knowledge, the materials, the coaching structures, the opportunity for collaborative time, leadership alignment, like, all of those things really have to be working together. And when one of those things is missing or it's being pulled in a different direction, the whole system struggles. And I think about that specifically like an ecosystem in that way.

[00:03:01.120] – Steve
It's interesting because when you first described it, the first book that I wrote on coaching was on peer coaching. And I titled the book, "Quality Teaching in a Culture of Coaching" for the exact reason that I didn't want coaching to be an event.

[00:03:20.920] – Steve
I didn't want it to be an activity. And I just have been writing a blog based on a piece that was triggered by another author who was describing that he thought the problem we were having with coaching today was it was being seen as a program.

[00:03:39.170] – Dr. Stukey
Yep.

[00:03:40.060] – Steve
So it fits that same pattern.

[00:03:42.690] – Dr. Stukey
It really does. And I think about, you know, we're finally moving into education talking about coherence, right? All the pieces coming together. And I think that maybe this is a turning point where we can get somewhere when we start thinking about each of these pieces being interdependent on one another.

[00:04:03.570] – Steve

So I continually propose that teacher learning is the key to increased student learning. And if you want to back that further up, school leadership learning,

[00:04:15.260] – Dr. Stukey
Absolutely.

[00:04:16.820] – Steve
So I wanted to hear your insights concerning what makes professional learning work. What are some of the critical elements that need to be there?

[00:04:28.810] – Dr. Stukey
Yeah, you know, it's interesting because there is a decent body of research around this topic specifically. And we know pretty clearly that there are a set of criteria that research has shown that makes a difference in how teachers learn. One is content specificity, not general PD. So when we think about being very clear on how does what I am teaching you directly connect to the content that you're learning. And so just as an example, a lot of times we have professional learning on things like culturally responsive instruction, really important. But what does culturally responsive instruction look like in reading? What does it look like in math? What does it look like in social studies? So being very, very clear on the content specificity is really important. Another piece that's really interesting in the research is that time matters. Duration is a key component. Now, there is not clear evidence that, you know, 200 hours is what makes a difference, but we know that sustained learning over time and with opportunities for teachers to try, reflect, get feedback, and refine those practices is what is really essential. The research that is also really interesting is that we default as teachers back to the way we were taught.

[00:05:54.970] – Dr. Stukey
So, you know, we spent 13 years watching teachers teach us, and so changing our practice is really challenging. Changing

for significant pieces of instruction is really challenging. So spending time getting feedback. Another really important piece that I think is often overlooked is the idea of alignment. So teachers' professional learning has to be aligned with the other district initiatives, the other school initiatives that are going on. My favorite example of this is I was working in the early 2000s with the Florida Reading Initiative, which was really working very hard to bring evidence-based practices into the literacy classrooms. And I would be working through all of these different professional learning sessions and immediately the teachers would say, "Yeah, but our materials don't do it that way. Our materials tell us to do it this way." And so that was just a clear disconnect in alignment between what the teachers were learning and what I was trying to help them do and the materials that they had in their classrooms every day. And so those are some of the immediate critical components: duration, content specificity, alignment. And then in addition to that duration piece, it's that it's job-embedded.

[00:07:14.010] – Dr. Stukey
And that's where your coaching, Steve – like, that's where coaching comes in. It is an extension of professional learning.

[00:07:25.060] – Steve
So this question may be a repeat, so if so, help me modify it. But I wanted to look for critical shortcomings, and in my head was the lack of coaching, the lack of feedback, the lack of understanding that you're probably going to do this wrong before you do it right. Would you reinforce those? And are there other things that you'd say are common shortcomings?

[00:07:55.340] – Dr. Stukey
I totally would. So I would 100% reinforce those, and I think we should talk about them a little bit more. But I think one of the biggest shortcomings that comes to mind is that oftentimes we treat professional learning as compliance rather

than learning. Right? Check the box, move on. And we're seeing it now as more and more states adopt science of reading legislation, right? So they adopt science of reading legislation, they mandate that teachers need to have some sort of science of reading professional learning. For many states, that's a program like LETRS, or Texas built their own. And so teachers engage in that learning, but what happens next? How are we ensuring that that learning transfers into classroom practice? That's where things are really missing. That's a huge shortcoming is that we think that changing teacher knowledge will change practice. And really there's a whole pathway between knowledge and practice, and that is often that implementation piece is really what's missing. The other thing that I would say is a huge shortcoming is that we often ignore teachers' prior knowledge, or we ignore their belief systems or existing mental models, especially in reading. We underestimate how personal teaching is.

[00:09:19.210] – Dr. Stukey
And so when we're asking teachers to make a significant shift in their practice, we need to name some of those tensions, name some of those belief systems, and then work through trying to understand how new information can be added to that. I think oftentimes we just think, "Well, if we just tell people stuff, they'll change their mind," and that has yet to come true in almost anything I've seen in my career.

[00:09:49.090] – Steve
Telling doesn't change belief.

[00:09:51.090] – Dr. Stukey
No, it doesn't.

[00:09:52.140] – Steve
And if you don't change belief, you don't change practice.

[00:09:54.880] – Dr. Stukey
It really doesn't. And I think it's really interesting because

research matters, but when we think about teachers, we almost have to change their hearts before we change their minds. And so I think that that is a piece that is often underestimated in terms of like, well, I told them to do something different. I don't know why they're not doing it. We haven't really addressed the depth of content knowledge needed, but in addition to that, their belief system around what it means to teach, and it's really important.

[00:10:30.150] – Steve
So are we dancing around the fidelity word here? [laughter]

[00:10:36.630] – Dr. Stukey
Fidelity, the F word in education. [laughter] You know, I so appreciate the idea of fidelity, but really what that comes down to is understanding how something is built. When we want teachers to have fidelity to a program, they need to be able to understand how the program's built, why it works the way it works, and I think that's a piece, again, we just kind of gloss over. I would argue that fidelity is really to our students. So fidelity is to our students, right? And so a program will never know what those students in front of you are giving you, what they need. However, programs are designed – well-designed programs have really important components that if you don't understand the design, you could inadvertently pull it apart in ways that aren't going to be beneficial for your students. So when we think about maintaining integrity to a program, that's a word I prefer to use instead of fidelity, right? Maintaining the integrity of a program, but we have fidelity to our students, and that is a nuance that is often kind of missed in the overall conversation around professional learning.

[00:12:01.720] – Steve
So I'm going to try a phrase with you that I've been using a little bit, and you need to know I'm very, very open to you pushing back and telling me I'm going down the wrong track. Okay?

[00:12:13.460] – Dr. Stukey
Okay.

[00:12:14.890] – Steve
But I've tried to describe that I think when we bring in a new program and the instructional approach that we're asking teachers to use is different, that we have to engage the teacher as a partner in – I'm going to actually say testing out a hypothesis. In other words, I'm suggesting our school district invested a lot of money in a hypothesis. They have no guarantee that this new program is going to work. They have a high belief. I mean, they've done a good ton of research. They've got evidence. But if a teacher thinks it's not working with this particular student, and I go back to the teacher's commitment and belief in their students. So if we could make the teacher a partner in assisting us in gathering evidence, and so that means the teacher has to have integrity to the program in order to collect the right evidence.

[00:13:21.780] – Dr. Stukey
Exactly.

[00:13:22.550] – Steve
But letting the teacher know they're in a partner and we're anxious to hear their feedback.

[00:13:27.460] – Dr. Stukey
I think what you're hitting on is such a missing part. Almost everything happens to teachers, not with teachers. And it's a real conundrum because the teachers are the ones with the most amount of knowledge. I love the idea of them being partners in this initial work. I think what also happens, just to kind of extend your metaphor, is that we don't allow these hypotheses time to unfold.

[00:14:01.230] – Steve
For sure.

[00:14:01.560] – Dr. Stukey

We are so quick to abandon a program without having the opportunity to understand its implementation. And then teachers have whiplash, right? Like, now I've got something different and you want me to do something different because we're not partnering with them in that way. So I really appreciate that metaphor. I think we should keep going with that.

[00:14:23.700] – Steve
I think sometimes they're abandoned before they've been implemented.

[00:14:27.060] – Dr. Stukey
100%.

[00:14:28.710] – Steve
Years ago, I was working with a system that they were 3 years into a new science initiative, looking at science being taught in a more hands-on discovery approach. And they went and they bought all the materials for it. And they were, you know, say it wasn't producing the results. Well, didn't take a lot of observations for me to find that there were many classrooms I was in where all the materials were there, but the way the teacher was delivering instruction hadn't changed at all.

[00:15:05.190] – Dr. Stukey
So exactly.

[00:15:06.710] – Steve
They're deciding the program's not working. And in fact, it hasn't been implemented.

[00:15:12.310] – Dr. Stukey
Exactly. And that's why I appreciate the word integrity to the program. Right? Like, we can't say it hasn't worked when we haven't even tried.

[00:15:21.030] – Steve
Yeah.

[00:15:21.440] – Dr. Stukey
So, yeah.

[00:15:22.980] – Steve
So I wanted to think about the critical commitments that different groups of people have. And I think we've kind of been labeling some of them, but if professional learning is going to produce student – if professional learning for adults is going to produce new learning for students, what kind of commitment do we need from administrators? What kind of commitment from instructional coaches and teacher leaders? And what kind of commitment from the teachers themselves?

[00:15:52.030] – Dr. Stukey
Yeah, I really want to start with the administrators and the leadership because I think that we've done a lot of work, again, to teachers without really thinking about the conditions that are necessary for learning, and that is really where the leadership comes in. So number one, protecting time for professional learning. It has to be there, and you actually have to protect it. It cannot be the first thing that gets cut because the bus schedule changed or lunch changed. And I will just go on that continual scheduling piece. The master schedule indicates all the priorities, and leaders are in charge of the master schedule. And so the number of districts I've been in or schools I've been in where the master schedule is driven by logistics like lunch and buses, and then intervention time, reading block time is shifted as a result. Nope, leaders, we got to step up into something different there. In addition to that, you got to be in the room. You have to be the lead learner modeling a learning stance. It's not just about being in the room for compliance. It's about actively participating in the professional learning that your teachers are learning about.

[00:17:13.570] – Dr. Stukey
How are you supposed to evaluate them if you don't even know what practices it is that you are wanting to promote? So

that’s another really important one. I think the other thing is really shifting from monitoring the compliance to monitoring the impact. So it’s not just about are they doing the thing, are we seeing a difference in our student data? If yes, why? Let’s do more of that. If not, why? Let’s do less of that. Really, let’s think through that together. And then I think finally for leaders, one of the biggest pieces is this idea of is psychological safety, right? Teachers have to feel like it’s okay to try some new practices, to not be very good at it, to struggle, and to come back with questions. If, if the culture in your building does not allow for that, then how are we really going to change practice? And so I think administrators, leaders, really set the tone for the learning environment. And in the book, I use the word lead learner. You have to be the lead learner to really show what’s necessary. I think if we go to coaching, the coaches in the building, the teacher leaders, those coaches are the connective tissue of this ecosystem.

[00:18:37.100] – Dr. Stukey
They live between a learning event and the classroom practicality. The coaches are the ones who actually know the students too. But they have to know the content deeply, and then they have to be able to help adults translate that content into the practice that matters in that particular context in their school. I think for coaches, the best coaching is more of a question than it is a statement. It’s building the capacity of the teachers we work with, not fixing them in some way. And so when I think about coaching and the habits of mind that coaches and teacher leaders need to have, what they’re doing is they’re normalizing the learning, right? Consistency, coaching cycles. They’re normalizing, hey, I tried this and then here’s what I noticed when I did it. That carries a different weight than coming from administrators. And so coaches really are – connective tissue is my favorite word to use there.

[00:19:48.430] – Steve
Does reflection fit there?

[00:19:50.750] – Dr. Stukey
100% reflection fits there.

[00:19:55.750] – Steve
Yeah. The coaches, the connective tissue is keeping the teacher engaged in the reflection on what he or she's doing and noticing.

[00:20:05.750] – Dr. Stukey
Right. And I think that that is the piece where it's like the teacher-student interaction, right? The coaching is helping really reflect on that because when we think about going back to integrity to the curriculum, fidelity, whatever that may be, the bottom line is how are my students responding and how am I taking that in and making shifts and changes as a result? And I think that's the whole deal with teachers too, is that teachers have to show up as active learners in this, right? Like, we've had a lot of bad professional development done to us as teachers. I mean, you can see it when people start to walk in the room with their body language. And there was a recent EdWeek study that when teachers were asked how much professional learning did they feel like they need in a year, and the majority of the answers was zero, right? Like, they're feeling like they haven't done this. I mean, they have – this isn't going to make a difference. And so we have to show them that professional learning is worth engaging in and that it is connected and it's not going away. I think that's one of the biggest things we hear so often is like, I'll just wait for the pendulum them to swing the other way and I can just keep doing what I'm doing.

[00:21:19.490] – Dr. Stukey
And so teachers being active learners and teachers also giving honest feedback about what's working and what's not. That's why I really loved your analogy here to being partners in

testing out this hypothesis. It is necessary to hear teacher feedback. It's not complaining. It's not a nuisance. It is necessary to understand what it is that needs to shift and what additional support is needed.

[00:21:47.820] – Steve
It hits for me why the word professional. It's what makes professional learning is I'm not telling you, you're gonna have to figure this out. I mean, I'm giving you information. I may be giving you research. I may be giving you examples.

[00:22:07.630] – Dr. Stukey
Right.

[00:22:08.210] – Steve
But it's not a recipe. It's not for you to carry it out. It's for you to go forward to learn from it.

[00:22:18.900] – Dr. Stukey
Right. You know, the literature calls those things conceptual inputs, right? Like, so what am I taking in that then I need to be able to see, again, to your hypothesis analogy, how this interacts with my students in my environment, in my unique context? And that's not to say that, like, every child learns differently. We're pretty much wired similarly. However, the unique context that our classroom brings, that our school environment brings, that are the cultures that are in there, those matter, and they make a difference in how instruction meets our kids.

[00:23:02.320] – Steve
I use an example of it. If you take everything you know about teaching and learning and you put it inside of a balloon, the outside of the balloon represents the areas for further study. So in effect, every time you get new professional learning, if it stuck something into the balloon or you went off to a conference or you read a piece of research and you put it inside the balloon, it really opened up the areas for you to

go next.

[00:23:32.480] – Dr. Stukey
Absolutely.

[00:23:33.600] – Steve
I think we act sometimes as if it closes down, that the new learning closes down and now you're more focused and got a direction. Instead, the new learning should be expanding you out, deeper thinking, stronger reflection.

[00:23:47.200] – Dr. Stukey
Well, that's a way of thinking about it's a starting line, not a finish line.

[00:23:51.850] – Steve
Yeah, I think that's what it is.

[00:23:55.230] – Dr. Stukey
Yeah.

[00:23:56.260] – Steve
So talk a little bit about how you put all this together in your organization's work with literacy.

[00:24:01.800] – Dr. Stukey
Yeah. So, you know, the Reading League is 10 years old now. So they're really a toddler in the world of organizations. But what's so interesting is when we started, we really were in a place of people didn't know. They just didn't know the research. They didn't have any kind of knowledge base. And so we worked originally as really just knowledge brokers, right? Let's help make the research accessible to teachers, make sure that they understand what we know about reading instruction over the past 50 years. What's shifted now is more people know, but what's missing is the actualization of that research. And so what we're really working very hard on now in the professional learning that we support districts and school with is implementation. Okay, if you know this and these are

the materials you have and these are, this is what we're seeing out of student data, how do we put those pieces together in a systematic way? And we're doing that both at a school level, but more importantly at a district level and at a state level to really help support coherence over time. We also have the Reading League Compass, which is our main resource on our website, which is just completely filled with resources for every different kind of stakeholder group, right?

[00:25:27.160] – Dr. Stukey
If you are a school leader, if you are a parent advocate, if you are a curriculum decision maker, here's where we're distilling the research and giving you tools to help ensure that that ecosystem we talked about at the beginning, that support is there all the way around, not one and done. The other big thing that we're working on is trying to really work with educator preparation programs. We want to stem the tide kind of at its part. We want to shift the instruction and reach teachers before they even get in the classroom to ensure that they are being trained immediately with what we know is going to make a difference in classroom practice. And then finally, the TRL Press and our TRL Journal. These are the ways that we keep practitioners connected to the research. The journal is just, it is exactly what I would have wanted as a reading nerd first grade teacher when I was teaching, right? It helps really actualize the research in ways that are very practical, and I think that's a big missing piece is that accessibility. And so the Reading League is really working to develop those ecosystems across the country and honestly across the world.

[00:26:53.580] – Dr. Stukey
We're starting to see more and more international folks come and join the things that we're doing. We had a gentleman join us from Kenya at 3:00 AM Kenya time for one of our webinars. I have to just like really give him a shout out for his

dedication there. But those are the things that we've been doing, and our professional learning really works to actualize the research, just like we've talked about today.

[00:27:21.860] – Steve
So, what's the best way for people to access those available resources and touch base with you?

[00:27:28.180] – Dr. Stukey
All right, number one, go to thereadingleague.org. That is our main website, and from there you can navigate to the Compass. That is chock-full of resources there. You can also learn more about our professional learning and reach out to us as well. My book, "Professional Learning Redefined," that's available through Corwin Press. It goes a lot deeper in some of what we've talked about today, but you can find that book there, and you can find me on LinkedIn, and TRL has a really strong presence there. So definitely engage. I am here to help and support you and would love to hear from you.

[00:28:07.240] – Steve
So as we close out in the quick coming days here. Yeah, teachers are going to be walking into schools maybe a couple days ahead of the kids.

[00:28:18.070] – Dr. Stukey
Yep.

[00:28:18.870] – Steve
Some of them will have had professional learning workshops during the summer.

[00:28:24.570] – Dr. Stukey
Yep.

[00:28:25.210] – Steve
Some will have them the day before the kids come.

[00:28:30.510] – Dr. Stukey

Oh, they love that, right? Like, just lock me in my classroom? Stop talking to me! [laughter]

[00:28:37.330] – Steve
[laughter] So I just wondered if you had any closing words on what we ought to keep in mind as we look to the startup of a new year for teachers.

[00:28:49.280] – Dr. Stukey
Yep. So I'm going to repeat one thing I already said. Summer professional learning is a starting line, not a finish line. Full stop. And I think the question I'd be asking every leader right now is, what structures do you have in place a space for teachers to apply what they've learned and get support in those first weeks of school? If the answer is we're hoping they remember it and we're hoping they try it, nope, that's a gap. And that's where those coaches and teacher leaders and collaborative teams really come in. They are the reentry points. They keep that learning alive when the formal session is over. So I want to just say, professional learning isn't something that just happened to you during the summer. It's what we do all year. And leaders, it's your job to really check in and not just check off what's been done.

[00:29:42.220] – Steve
Thank you. I was looking forward to this conversation, and it actually surpassed even what I was looking forward to. I just love interacting with you. I hope we can get to do it again sometime.

[00:29:56.040] – Dr. Stukey
Oh, without a doubt. Thank you for having me, Steve. I so appreciate it.

[00:30:01.000] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @SteveBarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos

and blogs at barkleypd.com.