

NEWSLETTER

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REDEFINING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NEARLY TWO DECADES of research has taught some powerful lessons about how to design and implement meaningful and effective professional development for teachers. This month's newsletter examines the characteristics of high-quality professional development and offers some suggestions for improving its impact and effectiveness.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

The research on effective professional development is consistent across many studies. Researchers Willis Hawley and Linda Valli (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, n.d.), in their synthesis of the professional development literature, find that high-quality teacher development is as follows:

- Informed by research on teaching and learning and provides a strong foundation in subject content and methods of teaching.
- Integrated with district goals to improve education, guided by a coherent long-term plan, and driven by disaggregated data on student outcomes.
- Designed in response to teacher-identified needs and utilizes collaborative problem solving in which colleagues assist one another by discussing dilemmas and challenges.
- Primarily school-based, provides sufficient time and other resources, and enables teachers to work with colleagues in their school building.
- Continuous and ongoing, incorporates principles of adult learning, and provides follow-up support for further learning.
- Evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

If district officials, principals, and school leadership teams keep all of these characteristics in mind when designing professional development with and for teachers, they are likely to create productive and satisfying growth opportunities that make good use of professional development dollars. Additional considerations—ranging from basic to more complex—can further these experiences. Professional development can move beyond its traditional focus on a series of activities to become an integral part of a thriving community of learners.

Focus, Focus, Focus

For professional development to be effective, it needs to become a focus of attention for policymakers and educators. This focus requires reflection about exactly what kind of professional development is necessary and who should receive it in order to effect meaningful reform. As Harvey Daniels of National-Louis University (*The Missing Link in School Reform: Professional Development*, n.d.) observes, it is not sufficient for educational leaders to assume after having made structural, political, and logistical changes in state or district policies that these changes will somehow trickle down to the classroom level and automatically change teacher practice. Instead, he asserts, “teachers must be helped—not just commanded—to teach in new, different, better ways. The way to make this happen... is through sophisticated professional training—the final step in delivering the promise of reform.”

District and school administrators are the primary movers behind ensuring that professional development is an ongoing and integral part of a teacher’s professional life. First, it is the district’s responsibility to ensure that principals are trained to be instructional leaders who recognize that teacher professional development is a critical component of a healthy, flourishing school. With this training, principals then will be able to model ongoing learning by actively participating in professional development both for themselves and with teachers. They will understand the importance of consulting with teachers to collaboratively determine the kinds of professional development needed—and they will work to ensure that the necessary funds and resources are allocated to support effective implementation.

Even when this groundwork has been established, though, designers of district and school professional development need to remember the importance of focus in professional development, specifically a focus on curricular issues as they relate to increased student achievement. As Daniels (*The Missing Link in School Reform: Professional Development*, n.d.) asserts, “Too many professional development programs are generic, promising to raise achievement by addressing diffuse issues such as thinking skills or classroom management. However, the most effective programs put content at the center, focusing professional development squarely in the curriculum: on math, or science, or writing, social studies, or reading. Broader concerns such as student thinking skills or classroom management then are quite naturally covered in the context of content learning, not vice versa.”

Vary the Format

Once district and school staff members have thought through their professional development needs, it is important that they determine the appropriate format of the proposed activities. The desired outcome should dictate the format, which can range from large-group faculty meetings to team meetings to opportunities teachers can take advantage of on an individual basis.

Full faculty meetings are especially well suited to initiating and sustaining professional development that supports buildingwide change as these formats provide opportunities for all staff to hear the same message at the same time, decreasing the likelihood of confusion or misunderstanding. Thus, if a school is about to begin comprehensive school reform—which emphasizes a change not only in instruction and assessment but also in school climate, community and parental involvement, and teacher professional development—it makes sense to set aside time for all faculty members to become familiar with the aspects of reform in a large-group setting. The district or school staff responsible for initiating the reform should provide an overview followed by smaller group settings such as grade-level or team meetings.

These team meetings provide teachers with the opportunity to learn more about the proposed reform and its impact on them. They can ask questions and gain greater understanding of the

kinds of instructional changes the reform requires. A small-group setting, for example, is conducive to learning how to examine student work by walking through the process step by step or for practicing reading conferences with students. And perhaps most importantly, teachers can take turns leading the meetings so that institutionally the leadership capacity of the school is increased.

Although large- and small-group settings often are appropriate for conducting professional development activities, principals and leadership teams also should remember the value of individual professional development through which teachers attend conferences, meetings, or classes related to their areas of expertise and interest. After attending one of these events, teachers should be encouraged or even expected to share what they have learned with their colleagues at a faculty or team meeting.

Actively Engage Teachers

Having established the focus of and a variety of formats for professional development, district and school staff must think about the best ways to engage teachers. Professional development is likely to be more successful if certain principles about how adults learn are kept in mind. Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the field of adult learning, outlines the principles found in an effective professional development program (Lieb, 1991). They include recognizing that adults need to be free to direct themselves and appreciate being active participants in the learning process. The knowledge adults acquire should be connected to their life experiences as well as be relevant and practical. Further, adults appreciate a goal-oriented program that is well organized, and they, like all students, want to be shown respect. This means the learning environment needs to allow for their voices to be heard and their opinions to be expressed.

Another strategy for engaging teachers is involving them directly in identifying areas of particular interest. This involvement is likely to increase their commitment to learning new techniques and paying attention to research. Reluctant educators should be provided with data that link high-quality professional development with a focus on academic content. Teachers should be encouraged to speak up and share their concerns and ideas. They should be provided with hands-on experiences when

possible. For instance, if they are learning how to teach students to edit their work, the professional development session should provide time for participants to practice editing. When watching videos about exemplary instructional practices, teachers should not only observe but also discuss what they are viewing. They should not be the unmoved recipients of yet another lecture.

Expand the Definition of Professional Development

Meetings, conferences, presentations, workshops—these make up the typical “professional development calendar.” However, it is critical to note that long-lasting professional development goes beyond a schedule of activities and events. Taking professional development to the “next level” is about establishing a mindset that focuses on ongoing learning and encourages continuous self-reflection. Teachers who internalize this expanded definition of professional development are eager to learn from one another all the time. They share their expertise readily with colleagues outside the confines of meetings or workshops, offering to model instructional strategies and assist colleagues who need help. These teachers continuously look for ways to improve their own instruction through books, videos, or conference workshops. They observe colleagues in their classrooms and follow up with discussions about what they saw or heard. In buildings where these approaches to professional development have been established, a tone of respectful learning is evident. In this way, teachers move beyond a traditional definition of professional development and begin to establish a true learning community.

Conclusion

For reform efforts centered on improving student achievement to be successful, teachers need to have the necessary skills, tools, and support. Simply trusting that structural and logistical changes will translate into significant improved learning is wishful thinking. Teachers need concrete, continuous professional development to hone their current skills and learn new ones. And they need to be respectfully treated as adult learners who bring skills and experiences to meet the challenge of increasing student achievement.

Resources

Holland, H. (2005, summer). Teaching teachers: Professional development to improve student achievement. *Research Points*, 3(1).

Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association. Retrieved February 27, 2006, from http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Research_Points/RPSummer05.pdf

This review focuses on learning opportunities for teachers that are explicitly aimed at increasing student achievement.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (n.d.) *Professional development*. Retrieved February 27, 2006, from <http://www.ncrel.org/info/pd/>

This website contains professional development resources, tools, and links to additional websites.

References

Lieb, S. (1991, Fall). *Principles of adult learning*. Retrieved February 27, 2006, from <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm>

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