



The  
**Professional  
Development  
Pathways Model:**  
From Policy to Practice

by Joyce M. Lieberman and Elizabeth A. Wilkins

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In this model, professional development is aligned with the needs of the school, the teachers and, most of all, the students.

Mention professional development to teachers and note their reaction. It's not uncommon to hear, "That was an *interesting* workshop, but I don't see how I can use that information in my classroom." Or, "I wish these after-school in-services were more applicable to my needs and my students." Sadly, teachers often admit that the professional development they receive provides limited application to their everyday world of teaching and learning.

This state of affairs is problematic for two reasons. First, over the past 25 years, professional development for teachers has gone from a choice to a mandate (Holmes Group 1986; National Commission for Excellence in Education 1983; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF] 1996, 2003; U.S. Department of Education 1994, 2002). Because professional development now is required for teachers and is often linked to certification, workshops and in-services must be better designed and relevant (Illinois State Board of Education n.d.; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS] 2002; Ross 2005). Second, professional development increasingly is cited as a key mechanism for improving schools (Newmann, King, and Youngs 2000; Elmore 2002; Frechtling 2001).

One of the critical issues identified by the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (Cook and Fine 1997) is that the "ultimate worth of professional development for teachers is the essential role it plays in the improvement of student learning." Recently, several reports have been released on the importance of teacher quality (NEA Foundation 2005) and, more specifically, on the impact of National Board certified teachers' assessment and classroom practices (NBPTS 2005). Additionally, Teacher Leaders Network (2005) and the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (2002) have published research that supports the critical role of professional development in advancing student learning in high poverty schools. Simply put, if teachers are better prepared, they can more positively impact student achievement.

The shift to mandated professional development has caused states, institutions of higher education, and school districts to respond. What follows is a brief explanation of how each has answered that call, followed by a description and examples of the Professional Development Pathways (PDP) Model that can be implemented to make in-services and workshops more comprehensive, ongoing, and meaningful for teachers, teams, departments, schools, and districts.

## States

States have answered the professional development call by restructuring their licensure/certification process to acknowledge various levels of teaching expertise (e.g., novice or experienced). Forty-eight states and numerous

local school districts offer incentives for national board certification; 33 states have enacted mentoring and induction programs; and 29 states have established some form of a professional standards board (NCTAF 2003).

## Institutions of Higher Education

Colleges and universities have answered the professional development call by redesigning their beginning and practicing teacher programs. Across the country, beginning teacher preparation programs have aligned their curriculum with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) or similar state standards (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education n.d.). In addition, many have redesigned graduate programs or offer graduate certificates aligned with the NBPTS five core propositions (NBPTS n.d.a).

## School Districts

The increasing emphasis on standards has created a shift in *how* school districts deliver professional development (American Federation of Teachers 2002; Birman et al. 2000; Lewis 2002; Zimmerman and Jackson 2003). Many school districts nationwide are collaborating with universities in designing and delivering professional development for their teachers; at the same time, some school districts are designing and implementing their own programs. The shift has led to a significant increase in the number of district offices specifically designated to design and implement professional development. Those in charge of professional development often struggle with meeting the needs of every teacher, because school contexts are so different. They are expected to consult the district or school improvement plan, myriad standards, and state certification requirements so that they can plan effective, meaningful professional development.

There is support from several organizations. For example, one mission of INTASC (n.d., 2) is to "provide a forum for its member states to learn about and collaborate in the development of new programs to enhance the

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professional development of teachers.” NBPTS (n.d.b) lists school reform success stories that document the impact of aligning school improvement initiatives with National Board standards. The National Staff Development Council ([NSDC] 2001) provides resources for designing and implementing professional development based on its own standards.

So, how do educators connect seemingly disconnected requirements to create meaningful professional development that meets individual needs and those of an entire school, as well as district and federal requirements? One way this can be accomplished is through the use of the PDP Model.

### The PDP Model

The PDP Model includes four recommended steps that build on the unique needs of each school or district (see Figure 1). Because schools are so different in context, composition, and need, the model is purposefully flexible and allows faculty and staff options for individualized, grade-level, subject-area, and team-based professional development.

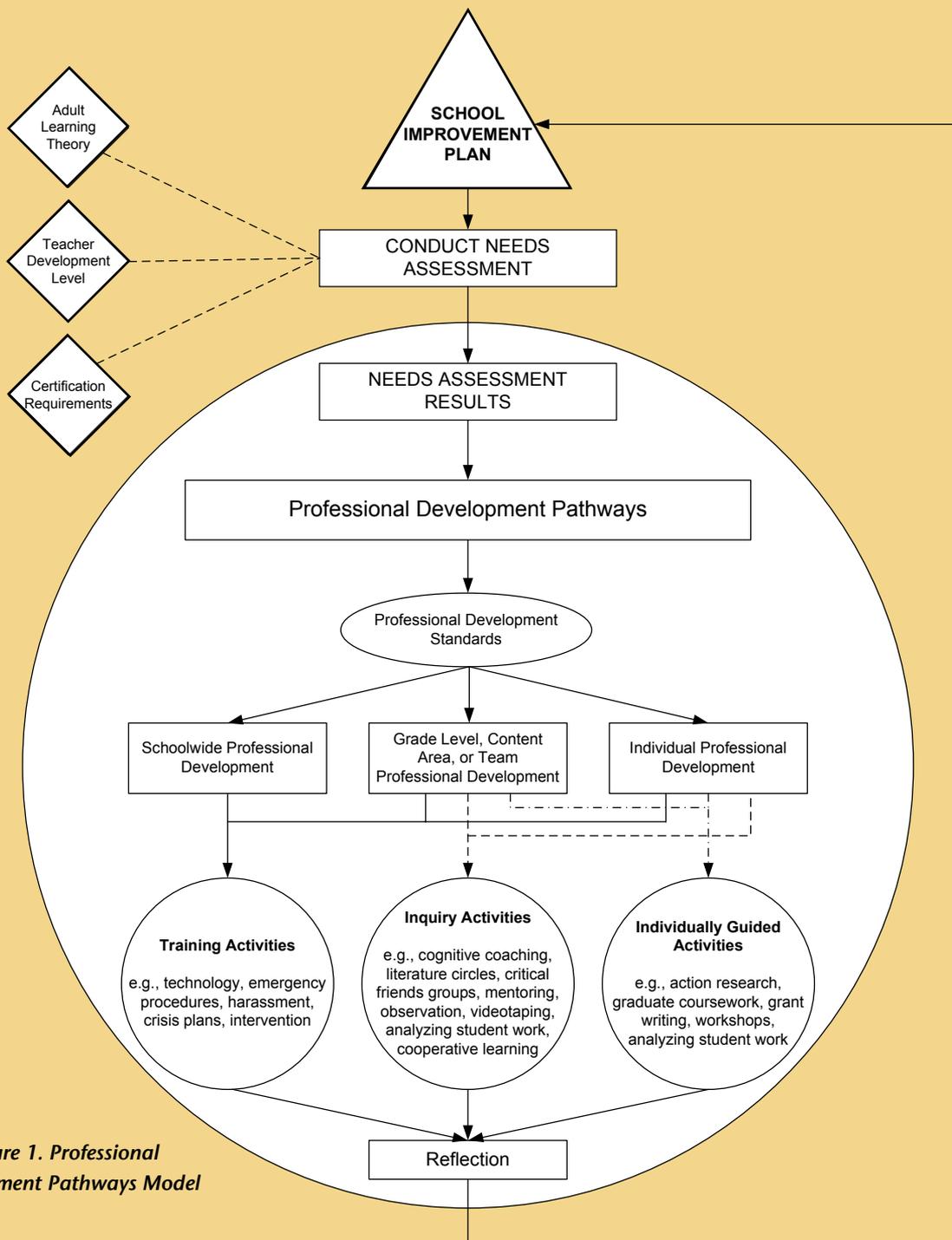


Figure 1. Professional Development Pathways Model

**Step 1: Assess the needs.** Start by consulting the school improvement plan (SIP) to determine critical areas that need to be addressed. Next, conduct a needs assessment to determine individual needs. Then, filter the assessment results through three lenses: adult learning theory, teacher development levels, and state certification requirements.

**Step 2: Determine the appropriate professional development pathways.** The pathways allow faculty and staff members options to select individualized, grade-level, subject-area, or team-based opportunities. The pathways need to be aligned with areas of improvement defined in the SIP, results from the needs assessment, as well as the 12 professional development standards created by NSDC (2001): context (learning communities, leadership, and resources); process (data driven, evaluation, research based, design, learning, and collaboration); and content (equity, quality teaching, and family involvement).

The PDP Model provides three broad choices for faculty, which are not mutually exclusive:

- Schoolwide training or information sessions, appropriate when all stakeholders need to receive similar information.
- Grade-level, content-area, or team development, in which teams have the freedom to determine strategies that best fit their needs.
- Individual choice options, such as inquiry and individually guided activities.

**Step 3: Reflect.** Over the past decade, standards for teachers and administrators have been drafted and refined. Each set acknowledges the role of reflection as one vehicle through which faculty members can revise their practice to improve teaching and learning. Reflections should include an emphasis on the relationship between the professional development provided and the impact on student learning.

**Step 4: Revisit the SIP.** In addition to using reflection as a strategy for improving teaching and learning, the technique also should be used to determine the next steps toward addressing the larger needs of the school. At this point, it is time to revisit the SIP, and the PDP process begins again.

## Theory into Practice

The PDP Model has been developed and revised in collaboration with educational professionals, including classroom teachers, principals, curriculum directors, and superintendents from urban, suburban, and rural elementary, middle, and high schools across the

northern Illinois region. Faculty members from Northern Illinois University have provided a framework for designing and implementing professional development, and schools and districts have provided the context.

In a doctoral-level course, *Analysis of Professional Development Theory and Practice* (Lieberman 2006), students are guided through the process of designing and implementing a yearlong comprehensive professional development plan using the PDP Model. Each plan for the course is constructed based on an identified need in a school or department. Some of the previous plans have focused on building community for incoming high school freshmen, improving literacy instruction, promoting writing across the curriculum; embedding reading strategies in science curriculum, enhancing reading skills in fine arts courses, and differentiating instruction.

Administrators and teachers subsequently have provided commentary about the implementation of their plans—obstacles encountered, strategies for overcoming them, and sustainability. For example, after taking the course and using the PDP Model, one elementary school assistant principal shared:

*My experience in designing professional development activities was limited to selecting current hot topics in education for a one-shot presentation. I now understand the necessity of connecting the topic to our building goals and teacher standards, selecting an appropriate professional development model, and addressing adult learning theory.*

In another elementary school, the principal, in collaboration with the curriculum director and superintendent, gained valuable experience implementing her plan. She commented:

*There have been some big changes in how we do professional development at our school. We are really enjoying ourselves! This year, the building leadership teams want to plan the entire staff development calendar for the next several years. I don't have to worry about anyone having apathy or not wanting to be involved with decision making. The plan I created last semester has been pulled apart a bit, but we are still following the spirit of the concept.*

Two high school teachers noted that the PDP Model helped to overcome previous perceptions of professional development.

*In the past, much of the professional development in our school has been mandated from the*

administration and delivered by an outsider in one or two days of instruction. There was little, if any, followup, which meant that teachers were never held accountable for the information. Administration would present the latest fad and claim that there would be a long-term commitment in our building, only to replace it when the next great idea came along. We anticipate that using the PDP Model will provide our school with a framework that is flexible and meaningful for faculty and staff.

A district professional development coordinator observed:

*We now make sure that any experience or proposed workshop in our district is first correlated to the professional development standards. If there is not a strong correlation, the program does not run. The workshop must meet at least two standards and also have a link to our district's strategic plan. This foundation provides clarity in the purpose of staff development. Our district was able to take the project from my class and build upon it as a cornerstone for the next few years of staff development.*

One middle school curriculum director acknowledged the challenges:

*There are always those teachers who don't or won't participate with a full heart. The best we can hope for is a contagious feeling that passes through the entire school, resulting in positive energies which then cycle back to creating more trust—an upwardly mobile spiral.*

Though many of the educational professionals commented on the complexity involved in the process, they overwhelmingly agreed that the PDP Model is comprehensive and provides “voice” for many stakeholders who often go unheard. For most, the obstacles were far outweighed by the anticipated outcomes of a professional development plan designed to address the individual needs of educators within the overall school improvement plan.

## Closing Thoughts

The emphasis on professional development for teachers no doubt will continue, and school districts and institutions of higher education likely will continue to participate in its delivery. Perhaps the PDP Model can serve as a conduit. Given the current political climate in education, it makes sense for school districts and institutions of higher education

to collaborate on the implementation of professional development. The PDP Model is one option that lends itself to comprehensive, ongoing, and meaningful professional development for individuals, teams, departments, schools, districts and, most of all, for children. ■

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