



Professional Development THAT WORKS

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Professional development as a term and as a strategy has run its course. The future of improvement, indeed of the profession itself, depends on a radical shift in how we conceive learning and the conditions under which teachers and students work.

—MICHAEL FULLAN

Once again it is Wednesday afternoon, and you are sitting in a large group while a presenter delivers a training session using interactive whiteboards. You're supposed to be learning how to display a Prezi, add audio or video to a PowerPoint presentation, and use an interactive feature in Keynote. But the presenter treats everyone as if he or she has the same comfort level with and knowledge of technological applications, and thus, some of your colleagues are engaged, some are looking out the window, and some are checking their smart phones. Or maybe you are listening to a speaker who is simply describing research but has thus far failed to link its application to the pragmatic realities of the classroom. You're silently weighing the usefulness of what you are learning against the time you're spending learning it.

We've all been there.

◆ Professional learning should link directly to improved student outcomes.

◆ Such professional development focuses on increasing teachers' pedagogical skills or content knowledge and engages teachers in active learning, collaboration, feedback, and reflection over time.

Many educators question whether the professional development that they participate in has any effect on student learning. Can a presentation have a direct impact on what they do tomorrow, next week, or next year? Are they just learning old tricks with new names? Educators have come to learn that often the objectives of professional learning do not correlate with improved student learning outcomes. So is professional development really worth the time dedicated to it?

Effective Professional Development

Professional development is defined by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001) as “a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” that should foster “collective responsibility for improved student performance.” Over the years, this definition has consistently focused not only on teacher development but also on student achievement. Therefore, professional development should not be a way for teachers to be “fed” information that they then can elect to implement or not, but it should be a thoughtful, intentional process that allows educators to learn, practice, reflect, and assess. Most importantly, those activities should link directly to increased student learning results.

Although debate over the effectiveness of diverse professional development experiences has been going on for years, education leaders still book the speakers, attend the conferences, and forfeit their time in the hopes that one of the things they hear may, in fact, affect student outcomes. Research on the direct impact of certain experiences on student learning outcomes is limited, but recent research shows some strong links. For example, research by both Marion Meiers and Lawrence Ingvarson

(as cited by Bash & D’Auria, 2012) indicated that there is a sufficient research base to identify characteristics of professional development that leads to improved student learning. Those include a focus on:

- Specific content- or subject-area knowledge or pedagogical strategies
- Active learning
- Sufficient duration
- Reflection and feedback
- Collaboration.

As those characteristics show, professional development cannot be achieved in “one off” sessions or through expedient means; rather, it requires educators to rethink traditional approaches and incorporate the proven characteristics in professional development. Moreover, a long-term plan that includes dedicated money, time, resources, and stated outcomes—those that are driven by district- or schoolwide goals—is essential to effective professional growth and learning.

SPECIFIC CONTENT

Professional development that delivers results has a sustained focus on pedagogical strategies or specific-content knowledge. Learning experiences that are specific to teachers’ day-to-day practice have proven to be powerful in improving student learning outcomes. For example, a teacher who has a diverse classroom of learners and receives training on differentiation will be able to make improvements to his or her daily instruction and thereby affect student outcomes because he or she is more apt to address individual student needs appropriately.

Further, in his study analyzing various characteristics of effective professional development, Guskey (2003) found that the most frequently cited characteristic was enhancement of teachers’ content and pedagogical

Case Study

Following are examples of what a professional development plan might look like—with examples under each of the components—for the goal of implementing the Common Core State Standards curriculum in mathematics.

Specific Content

- Attend a weeklong seminar on understanding the math standards.
- Attend a three-day workshop on assessment rigor and differentiation as a team.
- Participate in a critical friends group or other professional learning community (PLC) to review student work.
- Examine standards by unit, plan their implementation, reflect on data gathered, make alterations to the implementation plan, and share successes and strategies at monthly team meetings.
- Provide time to understand and reflect on the mathematical practices at two faculty meetings.

Active Learning

- Review student work each week.
- Participate in interactive sessions.
- Model lessons for colleagues or review taped lessons.
- Share results in team meetings.
- Assess the professional development implementation on student outcomes (data analysis).

Duration

- The focus for professional development spans one to three years.
- Workshops are full or half day to allow for active learning opportunities.
- Professional development activities are directly linked to the strategic plan of the school or the district.

Reflection and Feedback

- Provide peer-to-peer feedback through critical friends groups or other PLCs.
- Review the results of student work and make changes on the basis of those results.
- Host critical conversations with administrators and colleagues.
- Review formative and summative assessments of student results at each team meeting.

Collaboration

- Include built-in reflection and sharing of strategies in small collaborative teams, whether by discipline, PLC, or other established group structure.

Assessment

- Review standardized test results over time (three years at least).
- Analyze results from common assessments (regular, ongoing).
- Survey students, faculty members, and families to get feedback (at the end of each year of implementation).

knowledge. He explained, “Helping teachers to understand more deeply the content they teach and the ways students learn that content appears to be a vital dimension of effective professional development” (p. 749). As a result, educators must make a distinction between lifelong learning that can inspire and rejuvenate the teaching spirit and that which is able to improve day-to-day content and instruction through direct application.

ACTIVE LEARNING

Active or inquiry-oriented learning approaches can take varied forms. This indicator includes learning that is active, not passive. Examples of active learning include interactive discussions; observations followed by feedback and discussion; reviews of student work, hands-on activities; and opportunities that allow for immediate implementation, practice, and reflection.

DURATION

Change requires sustained improvement over time. A common criticism of professional development activities is they are too short and offer limited follow-up to teachers once they have concluded. Professional development must be of sufficient duration, including both span over time and number of hours spent on a specific activity to master the content and skills needed to make a significant impact on teacher practice. For example, Desimone (2009) found that “research has not indicated an exact ‘tipping point’ for duration but shows support for activities that are spread over a semester (or intense summer institutes with follow-up during the semester) and include 20 hours or more of contact time” (p. 184).

Similarly, Guskey and Yoon (2009) explained that although the workshop model has been criticized as ineffective, “all of the studies that showed a positive relationship between professional development and improvements in student learning involved workshops or summer institutes” (p. 496). Their findings indicated the need to have enough time to include active learning opportunities, to participate in sufficient follow-up, and to give and receive feedback to sustain improvement over time.

REFLECTION AND FEEDBACK

Teachers crave innovations and ways to improve their craft—they are lifelong learners by choice and often do not complain about spending their time on professional development if they think that it is being used wisely and effectively. Effective professional development contains opportunities to practice, ways to follow up and reflect on the content or skill, and a structured manner in which to host those essential conversations. Further, recognizing that the results are often not immediate, but that strong professional development affects student outcomes over time—weeks, months, or years—school leaders must provide an opportunity for teams of teachers to reflect and improve as they implement new practices. Through continual structured conversations, teachers are able to discuss the correlation of change (or lack thereof) in student performance in comparison with the original goal of the professional development.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2004) report, *Why Colleges Succeed*, explained that “the most distinctive characteristic of these very good teachers is that their practice is the result of careful reflection.... Moreover, they themselves learn lessons each time they teach, evaluating what they do and using these self-critical evaluations to adjust what they do next time” (p. 10). Through times of collective and personal reflection and through varied means of gathering feedback from stakeholders, teachers are again empowered to use the data as reference points to link their own growth and development to their students' improved understanding and performance.

COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A colleague of ours often states that schools overestimate what they can accomplish in one year and underestimate what they can accomplish in three. This is certainly true for professional development. Results cannot be measured immediately and strong professional

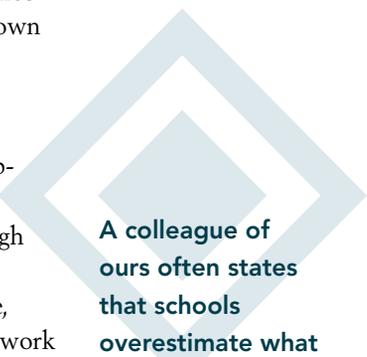
development affects student outcomes over time, so school leaders must learn to have long-term plans to accomplish their goals.

Professional learning communities can follow up on goals over time. That process involves giving teachers opportunities to practice, follow up, reflect, and learn in small groups with their peers, who often serve as the primary support structure for any sustained change. As Guskey and Yoon (2009) learned, “Virtually all of the studies that showed positive improvements in student learning included significant amounts of structured and sustained follow-up after the main professional development activities” (p. 497).

In addition, opportunities for ongoing collaboration—which is not evaluative in nature and encourages an atmosphere of trust and focus on student learning—encourage teachers to try new strategies. Establishing a model that allows teachers to implement, practice, and use the skill or content immediately in collaborative teams creates a cycle whereby teachers focus on student performance and outcomes over time. This also allows for continual professional learning to take place in accordance with where faculty members are in their own learning and implementation cycles.

Measuring Impact

Measuring whether a professional development experience has had a strong impact on student learning is challenging. Although there is yet no consensus, researchers are making headway in this area. For example, Desimone (2009) said that “using a framework that suggests a sequence of events—learning activities to changes in knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, to changes in practice, to student achievement improvements—could serve as a guide for when to measure what” (p. 186). She based her framework on the consensus of recent research suggesting that there should be a common way to study the student learning impact from professional development experiences. Further, she thinks that there is sufficient empirical evidence supporting a common



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Resources

Change the Terms of Teacher Learning. M. Fullan. 2007. *Journal of Staff Development* 28(3), 35–36.

The Essentials of Effective Professional Development: A New Consensus. W. Hawley & L. Valli. 1999. In G. Sykes & L. Darling-Hammond, Eds. *Teaching and the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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School Systems That Learn: Improving Professional Practice, Overcoming Limitations, and Diffusing Innovation. P. Ash & J. D'Auria. 2012. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference: A New Model for Teacher Growth and Student Achievement. R. Marzano & M. Toth (2013). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

What Makes Professional Development Effective? Strategies That Foster Curriculum Implementation. W. Penuel, B. J. Fishman, R. Yamaguchi, & L. P. Gallagher. 2007. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(5).

set of characteristics of effective professional development.

Because change first occurs with the teacher and his or her knowledge, skills, and attitudes before the professional development affects student learning, multiple measures to evaluate a true understanding of the success, or lack thereof, of a particular initiative are necessary. Guskey (as cited in Kreider & Bouffard, 2005–2006) said that

when teachers are experimenting with new approaches to instruction or a new curriculum, they need to gain evidence rapidly to show that it is making a difference. If they don't see such evidence, they quite naturally revert to the tried and true things they have done in the past. This is not because they are afraid of change. Rather, it is because they are so committed to their students and fear that the new approach might lead to less positive results. (p. 13)

Consequently, an assessment of a particular initiative should include short- and also long-term measures.

Assessments must include specific data, including student work, common assessments, standardized tests, and student grades; they should also include anecdotal data from teachers and students. Increased scores are certainly an important measure of success, yet just as important are the teacher and student feedback systems, in terms of process and result. Using that feedback, links can be made between the teacher's personal learning experience and changes in student outcomes. By identifying the reasons for improvement in student performance, teachers are more likely to take risks and continue on their individual professional learning cycle. Finally, improvements often take time and cannot be demonstrated immediately; therefore, decisions ought to be made on the basis of complete results, instead of simply with initial or incomplete findings.

Studies of the effects of professional development and the impact on student learning can be troubling. For example, one study found

that fewer than 15% of teachers use innovative ideas learned in traditional professional development to affect student learning or growth. Further, another result indicates that traditional models of professional development are largely “teacher-focused rather than being centered on student learning outcomes” (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Yet all schools still invest large amounts of their budgets in traditional models. But if schools make researched-based decisions about the type and format of their professional development efforts and directly link those activities to specific student learning improvement goals, they will derive direct results, especially if those efforts incorporate the five characteristics of effective professional development. **PL**

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