

Staff-Led, Site-Based Professional Development

The most effective professional development is peer-to-peer and imbedded in the work of teaching and learning. It is also connected to the school context and relies on trusted sources for new information.

The promise (or threat) of a conventional staff development session rarely generates much enthusiasm among teachers. In fact, these sessions often produce eye-rolling impatience, flagrant inattentiveness, and minimal compliance. But why? Shouldn't professional learning be engaging and...well...professional? What makes traditional staff development such an excruciating experience? (Lange, 2014).

It's boring and repetitive. People can hear the same message only so many times without becoming numb. "Every teacher is a teacher of reading." "Effective classroom management begins with understanding the needs of the child." "Principal leadership is the key to student achievement." The list is practically endless, and many of the messages, while true, harken back more than half a century. It's hard for school staff to get excited about hearing the same message for the tenth time.

It isn't personal. Many teachers see professional development (PD) as irrelevant to their personal needs, especially when it offers more of what they already know or doesn't take their professional life stage into account. A beginning teacher may be more enthusiastic about professional learning than a 30 year veteran, mostly because the veteran doesn't see anything new or promising in the topic.

It lacks candor. Most schools have real problems and challenges. Often, PD not only fails to address those challenges, but actually whitewashes them. One NJ teacher commented 'I hate it when they blow sunshine at us. Rather than talk about a real problem we need to solve, they tell us, "if we all work together or involve the parents or talk to the kids informally... whatever...things will be much better.'"

It ignores the school context. Generic PD doesn't usually change existing practices. When teachers are told, "you just need to tweak this to make it work in your classroom or in your school," it sounds as if the presenter doesn't know much about their unique situation. This is especially true when trying to move practices from a resource-rich school to a resource-poor one.

It requires teachers to replace trusted practices with untested ones. Without supportive training and coaching, teachers go from being an accomplished expert to a struggling novice. The implied message is that "you've been doing this wrong; now is the time to fix it."

What Works?

In many cases professional development is engaging, exciting and productive. Given the grim history of PD for many teachers, what makes it work well? According to Sparks (2002) and Croft (et. al., 2010), high-quality staff development:

- Focuses on deepening teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills;
- Includes opportunities for practice, research, and reflection;
- Is embedded in educators' work and takes place during the school day;
- Is sustained over time; and

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- Is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals in solving important problems related to teaching and learning

Teacher Led Professional Development

One of the best practices that incorporates the elements recommended by Sparks and others is teacher-led professional development – or teachers teaching teachers. Tracey Thomas, principal at Coldstream Park Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore says "teacher-led professional development fosters accountability, collegiality, professionalism, and pride. Teachers feel appreciated and respected for their contributions and knowledge, and they become confident and more competent in their own teaching practice." (Reported in *Education World* – B)

There are dozens of approaches and activities that can be used to facilitate teacher-led PD. Jeffrey Isaacs, Assistant Principal in Whitney Point (NY) summarizes their approach: "We have teachers leading training workshops and in-service professional development, we have had several book talks, and periodically we devote time during faculty meetings to mini-presentations and sharing ideas and strategies." (Reported in *Education World* – B)

Many schools send teachers to training workshops as an "investment" in PD for the whole faculty. The value of such investments might have been questioned in the past, but now most teachers who attend outside workshops do so with the knowledge that they will be responsible for sharing what they learn with their peers. Basically, they are "representatives" of the faculty, and are often provided with questions and specific issues to raise by their colleagues during the training. In one Florida school, teachers attending the workshop "tweet" their fellow teachers during the training so their colleagues can provide more questions and insights in real time.

One of the simplest forms of teacher-led PD is the Brown Bag activity used by Haas Middle School in Corpus Christi (TX). Each teacher gets a 9 x 14 brown envelope, a set of index cards equal to the number of teachers in the group (30 teachers means 30 cards each), and a marker. To keep it anonymous, teachers write on the envelope some identifying symbol (a favorite animal or last 4 digits of a phone number) and a problem or question for which they would like to solicit outside suggestions.

The facilitator collects the envelopes, shuffles them and redistributes them so each teacher has one. After reading the problem or question, teachers write on the card a suggestion, quote, resource – anything that might help the teacher asking the question. Then they drop their card in the envelope and pass it along to another teacher until everyone has commented on every question or time runs out. At the end of the session, the facilitator lays the envelopes out on a table, and the teachers collect their own. At the next meeting, teachers discuss the ideas they received and highlight any that were especially helpful.

A Database of Experts

A good place to start is to develop a database of experts in the school. The American School in Guatemala created a form that is placed on the school's shared drive on their computer system. On it, teachers list the topics, ideas, or activities on which they would be willing to provide PD for their colleagues. According to principal Tracy Berry-Lazo, "This information will help us recruit in-house people for our PD programs but, more important, the data is designed to provide teachers with references to colleagues who can offer individualized training, modeling, or peer observation opportunities." (Reported in *Education World* – B)

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Berry-Lazo's last sentence is noteworthy because it suggests ways teachers can provide professional development for their colleagues beyond a formal presentation or workshop. Teacher learning tends to be informal – that is, ideas are shared between and among colleagues during routine meetings, lunches, or other breaks in the school day. The database helps identify teachers who can help colleagues with a very specific need in an informal setting. It's a powerful tool for principals as well. A principal may not know much about teaching a foreign language, but he or she can certainly discern engagement and enthusiasm on the part of students. Asking that teacher to share approaches with other language teachers is a simple, inexpensive step toward improving instruction across the department.

Learning Together

Collaborative learning increases the likelihood of meaningful change because the new ideas enjoy shared ownership by groups of teachers. One striking example is found in the Design Teams used by the Chicago Public Schools, adapted by the Dhahran American School in the form of "focus groups."

Principal Bruce Hudson describes the process as follows. "Each group chooses an area in which to build their knowledge base and improve their teaching. After studying the areas for the first semester, each group was required to implement their new knowledge in their classroom during the third quarter. In the fourth quarter we shared our experiences, good and bad. At the end of the year we all agreed that focus groups were a very good tool for encouraging us to grow in a non-threatening way." (Reported in *Education World* -- B).

One of the most powerful forms of teachers teaching teachers (or even kids teaching teachers) is the use of **cognitive apprenticeships** or **cognitive coaching**. This approach has five phases – although they tend to blend together in actual practice. It is most useful for learning a new skill.

Modeling – The teacher demonstrates the practice or skill, while thinking "out loud" about what he or she is doing.

Coaching – The teacher coaches "novices" as they practice the new skill.

Articulation – During the practice session, the teacher asks novices what they think the next step might be and why.

Reflection – After completing the exercise, participants discuss the results, noting any problems they had or approaches they found especially helpful.

Exploration – Novices explore application of skill on their own with the coach "at arm's length."

In some cases, students can become the teachers. Seminole (FL) middle school kids train teachers in new technologies coming onboard in the school. "Expert" kids from the school's "tech squad" demonstrate the skill, then coach teachers (one on one) as they practice. Kids continue to serve as coaches throughout the year while teachers explore and implement new technologies.

Shadow Studies

Shadow studies are a way to experience the school day from the student's point of view. It not only helps build empathy for the student experience, it is a good way to identify things that work or need to be changed to promote better teaching and learning. The process is simple. (For a detailed description, see <http://shadowastudent.org/>).

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A teacher selects a student schedule at random and follows that student through the school day, noting what is going on in classes and how the student performs, usually in 5-10 minute segments. Some have lunch with the student or catch them at the end of the day to ask how they think their day went. Teachers then report to their colleagues on the experience, focusing on the student and how he or she reacted to different kinds of instruction. The purpose is not to critique the teaching style of colleagues, but to find “hacks” – small adjustments to existing practices – that help boost student success and achievement.

Individualized Professional Development

Sometimes, professional learning is important to the overall mission of the school, but it really involves only one person or a handful of people. Music, Art and PE teachers in particular often sit through professional development activities that are almost totally irrelevant to the work they actually do. In other cases, one person may be responsible for a project or initiative that affects the entire school but relies on his or her special expertise. In these cases, professional development may be highly individualized and delivered in very personalized ways.

In Hamilton (OH) teachers could apply for support for specific professional development training or education related to school goals. Examples include:

- The only music teacher attended a workshop for arts teachers on how to promote reading goals. She then shared her learning with other arts teachers in her school.
- A retiring teacher attended a conference on how to set up an after-school program to support struggling learners which was to be staffed by other, retired volunteers.
- The school district paid for two teachers to visit a nearby district to learn how to set up student internships in the community.
- The district paid for an online course to support a biology teacher who was planning to build a greenhouse. Additional support actually came from a local grower who contributed money and some greenhouse supplies as well.

Because individualized PD can be seen as favoritism toward either an individual or a program area, it is critical that these initiatives be guided by clear principles.

- Schools support PD related to important school goals, not just individual interests.
- PD is appropriate to teacher’s career stage.
- The most cost-efficient model is used.
- Local (e.g., district, state, university) resources are used as much as possible.
- The individual is expected to do something that benefits the school as result of the PD.

Cautions and Pitfalls

Staff-led professional development is not without its challenges and pitfalls.

Cost. Although the costs of the approaches described here are minimal, there are some. The cost of sending a teacher to a workshop can be substantial, unless it is district-sponsored or available through a regional service center. Some smaller schools pool resources with the expectation that the individual attending the workshop will train both faculties. Still others find a local sponsor who is willing to help pay the costs. The point is that finding funds, even small amounts, for professional development requires creativity and collaboration.

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Time. Many schools have some form of early release or dedicated professional development time. Even so, finding the time for teachers to prepare to lead PD activities or participate fully in them is a real challenge. Some schools relieve teachers who are preparing for PD of other duties, such as student supervision. Others offer stipends or other perks. In some cases, administrators cover classes so that teachers are freed to prepare.

More subtle is the fact that **building community does not necessarily equal growth.** If the staff “community” comes together only to reinforce existing, perhaps ineffective, practices, not much growth will occur. Some of this can be prevented by making sure that PD focuses on very explicit, achievement-oriented goals that should direct teaching and learning in the school. PD should not be simply a collection of tricks and techniques without an achievement focus.

A special skill necessary for those who lead staff-based professional development is the ability to handle **disagreement.** Experienced presenters and consultants are accustomed to being challenged, or even heckled, so most have a repertoire of skills to incorporate the disagreement and deflect harsh criticism. A teacher-colleague may not have either the skill or the thickness of skin to handle a lot of disagreement or criticism, so it is important to establish norms of collegiality that govern the way staff-led professional development is conducted. An explicit discussion of those norms in advance of launching a staff-led PD initiative is a key feature in successful programs.

The Bottom Line

Staff-led professional development can be highly effective, cost efficient, and satisfying for teachers and other staff. It requires thoughtful and sensitive planning, a spirit of collegiality, and ample opportunity for teachers to understand and attempt new approaches in a supportive environment.

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