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Professional Development: What's Working & Not Working

Abstract

Based on three years of study in 18 school districts, we conclude that high quality professional development provides the infrastructure for building excellent schools when it is anchored to an overriding vision focused on what is best for students that permeates the district. However, less than quality professional development is at best a waste of scarce educational resources and at worst a deterrent to real, sustained improvement.

In the fall of 1997, as we began our study¹ of teacher-led staff development, we suddenly found ourselves impaled on the horns of state testing mandates. Seeking permission for a site visit, we contacted districts that were too busy preparing students for the March testing to allow a visit by two researchers! After hundreds of calls to randomly selected districts from a sampling frame of over 1,500 districts, we finally found four that were willing to work with us. During subsequent years we were able to include another 14 districts in the sample. One of the original districts was in a rural state without a state testing program, two were large suburban districts where we had prior relationships, and the fourth was a district with an outstanding administrator who was thrilled to show-off a prize-winning school. It was from this varied base that we began gathering our data.

When we started our study, we were site-based advocates. We believed that empowered teachers, excellent in their trade, could overcome even the most incompetent principal to develop high quality schools. How wrong we were! After spending months in a wide variety of school districts, conducting over 400 hours of interviews with central office personnel, principals, teachers, and others affiliated with the schools, we came to a humbling conclusion: the quality of administrative leadership defines the quality of schooling for our children. This judgment can be best summarized in the following two phrases:

1. “As the superintendent goes, so goes the district.”
2. “As the principal goes, so goes the school.”

We found that administrators who lead others using a humanistic stance (we called it Type B, Collaborative) were by far the most effective, as compared to those administrators who simply attended to their jobs, managing those below them. A quality administrator could best be characterized as one who has a vision for doing “what’s best for kids,” knows where s/he is going, and who focuses on educational processes anchored in that vision. Thus, in the best

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schools studied, a collegial, supportive culture with an expressed direction for development and school improvement was designed to reach the vision of the school. We found that schools without visions were floundering, spinning their wheels, going nowhere but backwards. The key to progress at all levels was the district vision. Few individual schools were able to sustain their improvement efforts without being moored to a strong district focus.

The best schools we studied worked in tandem with a strong central office. In these districts, the superintendent knew what high quality education is and how to get there, focusing first on kids and then on the processes to educate them. Missing in these strong districts was an emphasis on state-mandated standards and testing. While these district valued mandated standards and state tests for public relations purposes and as general guidelines, they were not fundamental to evaluating their programs or staff. As one superintendent noted, concerning the new state test : *“Our scores will plummet. But we have a good program. And, we know it. We tell the state what to do. They don’t tell us what to do.”*

The best districts used professional development to realize their visions. These districts understood that achieving excellence is a long-term process which involves all staff. To accomplish this end, all staff were required to participate, though we saw no evidence of heavy-handedness here. What we did observe was cooperative planning involving principals, teachers, and central office staff who jointly set the priorities and established the means to achieve the vision. In these districts, processes were continually updated and refined, though the direction stayed the same.

We were in excellent districts where core goals had been established 5, 10, and 20 years ago. These districts have sustained their efforts, enduring the test of time, because they focus on sound processes leading to learning. Two districts, as an example, used writing as the fundamental teaching-learning tool for all students in all curricular areas. As a result, everyone in these districts – principals, teachers, central office personnel – were required to become skilled in teaching writing through district-sponsored and teacher-led professional development training. In our interviews, teachers and principals expressed support for the district focus which

influenced why they had chosen to work in this district. Some mentioned waiting for an opening before submitting their initial application to ensure a position in this district. The high quality of professionalism evident in these districts was a direct result of required professional development tied to the established district focus. This expectation did not deter anyone we spoke to from staying in the district.

In all the high quality districts, principals were leaders of their buildings, acting with the trust and support of the central office. Principals provided everyday leadership for their buildings including support for teachers to experiment with improving teaching/learning processes. The best principals focused on what is best for students in the building and advocacy for teacher involvement in district and school planning. They had a vision for schooling which was known and shared by all staff and aligned with the vision for the district. Quality, we found, permeated a whole district, not just one school at a time.

Following is what we found that works for principals in developing teachers:

1. Constancy of purpose. The principal has an end in mind that is focused on student learning in a positive, caring environment. The principal works with teacher leaders in the building to provide high-quality professional development [to include: workshops, guided study groups, and mentoring] in order to develop the purpose into a shared vision. This building purpose must be aligned to the established purpose of the district.
2. Principal Study Groups. In high quality districts, principals participate in their own study groups to focus on educational issues. In one example, middle and secondary principals formed a study group to meet with appropriate central office staff for two hours bi-weekly. The agenda consisted of broad-based educational issues brought to the group by the principals and the discussion focused on the current issue(s). An outside facilitator, who had no vested interest in the issues discussed, provided leadership for the group. These meetings were considered sacred, with all principals attending every meeting unless they were out-of-district or facing an emergency. The meetings were not interrupted, even by the superintendent or board members, and they were not concerned

with local concerns such as bus schedules and building maintenance. The outcome for this study group was the development of a common philosophy for principals and central office staff. They possessed a common understanding of what was important and understood the direction to get there. Even more importantly was the resultant care, respect, and trust cultivated among the principals and between them and the central office.

3. Teacher Study Groups. Principals play an integral part in supporting the development of teacher study groups. In high quality schools, teachers form discussion groups to focus on educational issues directly related to student needs. Effectiveness is enhanced when the groups are facilitated by individuals from outside the school. This can be provided through the central office, private consultants, or teachers from other schools. One high school we visited had implemented the Friday-Forty. Every Friday, for 40 minutes, the teachers with a common planning period met in a study group to explore educational issues. The single rule was that the time could not be used as a gripe session. Recommendations generated from these teacher groups were forwarded to the school advisory council for action.
4. Inservice Workshops. This can be a very powerful model for training when: (a) the workshop is focused on the vision for the school, (b) all (or all appropriate) teachers attend the workshop (in some instances, a trainer-of-trainers model can be implemented), and (c) the principal participates in the workshop. Principal involvement is critical because it provides him/her with the instructional knowledge-base needed for leadership. Moreover, the principal becomes a role model for expected behavior (some educators refer to this as “symbolic leadership”).
5. Follow-up. In effective schools, principals provide for follow-up support to professional development activities. This takes the form of mentoring, discussion groups, and additional training. We found that when this follow-up support is not facilitated by the principal, professional development training has no long-term impact.

6. Job-Embedded. Professional development is job-embedded in high-quality school districts. Involvement in training is an expected part of contracted, professional activity; it is not an add-on. In effective schools, all staff participate in professional development because it is the expected norm of the school. In one school, all staff went through a two-year study of personality so that they better understood their own behaviors and those of others. This process brought a highly diverse faculty together as a functioning team.

Equally important is what we identified as not working. Although most districts were spending lots of money on staff development, few districts had distinct budget lines for it. They drew money instead from a variety of different budget categories such as Title I or technology grants. All administrators interviewed indicated that they did not want a professional development budget line because it would be too easy for school boards to cut it in tight budget years.

Sadly, most of the districts we visited showed little value added for their professional development dollars. From our evidence, we suggest the following practices have little or no positive impact on school improvement.

1. Individual Choice. While touted in the educational literature as increasing effectiveness, we found no indication that offering individual choice in planning professional development translates into improvement in education. The problem is there is no constancy of purpose - no common direction with a specific end in mind to guide these initiatives. Whether it be a hot topic session or an extended, high quality institute, individual-choice professional development does not fit into a unified scheme with school-level follow-up support. Thus, it seldom translates into changes in teacher behavior.

Corollary to this, we found no evidence that professional development offered through sources outside the district, such as regional service centers or universities, has value. Should these outside agencies would first work with a district in aligning their offerings with the district mission and purpose and then provide services in conjunction with

district improvement efforts, the results might be different. We found no evidence of this occurring in any of the 18 districts we sampled.

We found that when a high-quality inservice workshop (or other training) was implemented within a district with appropriate district support, it resulted in effective school and classroom level change. This same workshop offered through regional centers resulted in no documented change. The key factor here is the importance of having a constancy of district and school purposes. With individual-choice professional development there is no constancy of purpose nor systematic follow-up support for implementation. Thus, it fails.

1. Use of teacher needs assessments. These “wants” lists are of little value. Teachers stated that they liked being listened to; however, they acknowledged that the inservice workshops they attended based on their surveyed needs had little value. Many teachers said that the workshops were good, but when questioned further could not even remember what they had attended. The missing requisite for success is that these needs assessments are based on individual choice rather than in the established purpose for the school and district. In the worst case scenario, districts used such needs assessments within a deficiency model where staff development was used to remediate “bad” teachers. The negative attitudes and feelings among teachers generated from this approach far out weighed any potential improvement in teachers’ skills.
2. Incentives. External incentives don’t work. We found most school and district professional development programs bribed teachers to attend inservice programs. Often this was through cheap graduate credit so that teachers could move up on the salary schedule. This ill-conceived idea has resulted in many teachers equating professional development with extra pay rather than viewing it as a job expectation. As one teacher stated and others echoed: *“I won’t attend the inservice unless I get credit.”* In addition, we found a lot of districts facing large budget increases associated with increased salaries due to professional development credits with no value added to the classroom. This will

backfire when school boards and communities realize that they are spending more tax dollars with no visible changes in educational results. The same problem occurs with “points” awarded programs implemented in several states and school districts, and other related external control mechanisms. These programs require teachers to obtain some predefined number of inservice points each year often controlled by teacher panels or state regulations. These programs focus on the outcome of staff development in terms of “points,” credit hours, or some other numerical quota rather than on improvement processes aligned with the district purpose. A similar concern occurs with required continuing education credits for teacher licensure. These schemes negate the belief that professional development is a job-embedded expectation.

3. Departments. In secondary schools, academic departments were generally delegated the task of providing professional development. We found this departmental structure to be an impediment to professional development because robust, artificial barriers were firmly in place. Typically, insufficient time was allocated for department meetings, much less meaningful professional development. Department chairs were academicians, not staff developers. Hierarchical structures were in place where senior faculty got the “best” classes with the most time for preparation and junior faculty got the “special needs” classes with the least time for preparation. Departments competed with each other for budget allocations and students. In other words, we found unhealthy climates in secondary schools that relied on the department structure for leadership. One notable exception was a middle school which had adopted both team planning and departmental design. On Monday through Thursday, grade level teams met for normal middle school planning. On Friday, academic departments met. This arrangement provided the strength in curriculum integration common to the middle school model with high levels of communication among teachers within the same academic area. By adopting both models, this cross between team and departmental planning provided an opportunity for strong professional development for all staff. In other middle schools, we found teaching

teams faced the same barriers as academic departments in high schools; that is, both teams and departments had little positive interaction with other teams and departments.

A Final Note

Professional development provides the foundation for school improvement when it is tied to a district purpose. We found staff development most effective in strong districts that had established a constancy of purpose focused on processes leading to effective student learning. To support the district focus, high levels of high quality professional development were provided for all staff, to include training, mentoring, study groups, and follow-up. Professional development was required in these districts as a job-embedded expectation for all educational employees. Principals and other administrators participated in training along with teachers as role models and to develop a common knowledge-base.

Ineffective is the practice of offering professional development based on surveyed needs assessments or individual choice. The use of external incentives such as cheap graduate credit is detrimental to the defined purpose of professional development. Finally, to become highly effective, secondary schools must find ways to mitigate the negative effects of the traditional departmental structure.