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SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT Professional Development

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Professional Development

Making sure that professional development is both “professional” and “development” is no small task. But schools that want to sustain improvements know that paying attention to learning for teachers and administrators is key to success. For long-term accomplishment of the school’s goals, teachers and administrators can’t learn what they need to know by attending a few one-shot workshops or by learning in isolation from their colleagues. Rather, their learning must be collaborative and connected to the goals and daily work of the school. In other words, professional development must be well planned, comprehensive, and connected to the school’s priorities.

Key Elements

There is increasing agreement about the characteristics of effective professional development programs. These characteristics have been identified in various documents, including a 1995 U.S. Department of Education publication outlining the principles of professional development and a 2001 National Staff Development Council publication outlining standards for staff development.

In this section, three key elements of effective professional development programs are described; these elements capture the characteristics of these programs that are critical for sustaining improvement. First, professional development programs that contribute to sustained improvement are relevant to ongoing improvement initiatives. Second, they are long term and integrated into daily practice. Finally, they provide teachers with targeted, timely feedback about their use of the knowledge and skills acquired through professional development.

Relevant

Simply put, a professional development program that is relevant ensures that learning activities address the school’s unique goals and needs and the various skill levels and learning preferences of participants. This means that the professional development program addresses content knowledge as well as pedagogical

skills and provides options for learning — from conferences and workshops to coaching and action research. To sustain improvement, a professional development program must include a review of information about students’ progress and improvements in teachers’ knowledge and skills. Monitoring the impact of a professional development program on student and staff learning can help ensure that the program continues to be relevant.

Long Term and Integrated Into Daily Practice

Teachers, like students, learn best when they have sufficient opportunities to acquire and integrate new ideas and put new skills into practice. Thus, staff development must be a long-term, ongoing process.

For professional development experiences to contribute to sustained school improvement, they should be designed as a sequence of activities that work together as a coherent whole (Garet, Birman,

Porter, Desimone, & Herman, 1999; Lauer, 2001). For example, a school interested in improving the mathematics performance of its students might provide teachers with an opportunity to attend a summer institute offered by the district or by a mathematics organization such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. During the following school year, an instructional resource teacher could provide coaching for the teachers, conduct demonstration lessons, or facilitate study groups. The teachers who attended the institute might meet on a biweekly basis to share samples of student work and to discuss how they are implementing strategies learned during the summer. They also might form a study group to discuss readings related to the topic of the institute. Periodically throughout the year, they should reflect as a group on how their teaching practices have changed and the effects of those changes on student learning. For professional development to sustain improvements, it must be purposeful, and the connections among activities and the reasons behind them must be clear to everyone.

Monitoring the impact of a professional development program on student and staff learning can help ensure that the program continues to be relevant.

The kind of professional development that sustains improvement requires a substantial investment of time and other supports (Sparks, 2002). Time for professional development should be set aside, either by reorganizing the school day or by revising the school calendar to provide early- or late-release days when students are out of school or participating in activities outside the classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Other supports for professional development might include a committee to plan activities and monitor results and teams in which teachers can learn together. The expectation that teachers participate in professional development and use what they learn as a result of those experiences is another less tangible form of support that makes it possible for professional development to sustain improvement.

Of course, it takes money to put the necessary supports for high-quality professional development in place. Successful schools know how to use their resources wisely for this purpose. They coordinate a variety of funding sources and earmark funds for professional development.

Provides Feedback

Like students, teachers need specific and timely feedback about their progress in using the knowledge and skills learned during professional development (Alseike, 1997). This feedback is particularly effective when it is provided through collaborative activities such as peer coaching sessions, team teaching, action research study groups, or formal processes for looking at student work and performance data (e.g., lesson study or critical friends groups). These methods of feedback help sustain improvement because they improve individual teacher practice and result in increased teamwork and collaboration.

What the School Leadership Team Can Do

The school leadership team can do much to ensure that available learning opportunities for teachers and others are useful, targeted, and effective. If the leadership team serves as the professional development committee, then

the primary responsibilities for planning and evaluating the professional development program rest with them. If there is a professional development committee, then the leadership team primarily serves a support role. For example, the leadership team can assist the committee with efforts to regularly assess and understand the changing needs of teachers, administrators, and students. They might help the professional development committee use results of needs assessments to determine what specific topics should be covered, what types of professional development experiences should be offered, when they should be offered, and to whom.

The school leadership team also should work with the professional development committee to align professional development with the school reform plan and ensure that all members of the school, not just teachers, are benefiting from ongoing learning experiences. For example, if one of the school's goals is to improve students' mathematics problem solving, the teams should work together to ensure that professional development activities help

teachers learn more about problem-solving strategies and ways to teach them.

School leaders also are responsible for providing the right type of pressure and assistance to ensure that staff members engage in professional development and reap the intended benefits. For example, the leadership team can provide gentle pressure by making known the expectations for professional learning. They can provide assistance by ensuring that structures and resources — time and money, for example — are in place. In addition, the leadership team should foster a culture of innovation and inquiry that encourages teachers to try new practices or materials (Moffett, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Making sure that administrative, organizational, and personal supports are in place to help educators make the adjustments necessary to sustain improvement for the long run is an important role for the leadership team.

The expectation that teachers participate in professional development and use what they learn as a result of those experiences is another less tangible form of support that makes it possible for professional development to sustain improvement.

What Does Professional Development Look Like in Our School?

The following continuum of sustainability strategies can be used to assess the adequacy of the professional development program in your building. Schools that take the actions described in the right-hand column are more likely to sustain improvement.

Least Effective	Somewhat Effective	Most Effective
Relevant		
<p>Professional development is based on informal needs assessments and activities are “one-size-fits-all.” Evaluation of the program is limited and focused on the quality of the activity rather than improved teacher practice. Changes to the professional development program are not related to the needs of the school.</p>	<p>Professional development is tied to the needs of the school. There are some options for professional development that take into account different levels of teacher expertise. Several sources of data are reviewed annually to determine if the program is improving teacher practice in ways that address the needs of the school. Changes to the professional development program are made if necessary.</p>	<p>Professional development is based on the needs and goals of the school. There are many options for professional development that take into account varied levels of teacher expertise. A variety of data are reviewed throughout the year to ensure that the program is improving teacher practice and student learning in ways that address the needs of the school. Changes to the program are made as needed.</p>
Long Term & Integrated Into Daily Practice		
<p>Professional development activities are disjointed and generally of insufficient duration for teachers to develop new skills. Some time is available for teachers to participate in professional development activities and encouragement is provided. Participation is not an explicit expectation. Funding is sought only on an as-needed basis.</p>	<p>Professional development activities are connected and some are integrated into daily practice. The activities are of sufficient duration for teachers to develop knowledge and skills. Supports in place include a professional development committee, designated time for teams of teachers to participate in school-level professional development, and an expectation to participate. Funds have been earmarked for professional development.</p>	<p>Professional development is long-term, ongoing, and integrated into daily practice. The activities are of sufficient duration for teachers to integrate what they have learned into their classrooms. A professional development committee is in place, and funding has been designated for professional development. Participation is a clear expectation for all teachers, and there is a culture of support for risk taking that encourages teachers to extend their learning.</p>
Provides Feedback		
<p>Teachers may receive informal feedback on what is learned in professional development experiences through chance conversations with colleagues, but no formal feedback on improvements in their practice is provided.</p>	<p>Teachers receive some feedback on their use of what is learned in professional development experiences through the teacher evaluation program or a district- or school-level coach.</p>	<p>Teachers receive frequent feedback on their use of what they have learned in professional development experiences through a variety of collaborative activities (e.g., peer coaching, team-level meetings, mentors, instructional support teachers, observations, self-reflection).</p>

From the Field

Witters/Lucerne Elementary School

Thermopolis, Wyoming

Four years ago, teachers at Witters/Lucerne Elementary School targeted improved reading comprehension as the school's priority improvement area. After intensive study of several models of effective literacy instruction, the faculty unanimously agreed to work with a model of literacy instruction new to their school.

Adopting an all-new model of literacy instruction necessitated additional professional development for teachers. Using Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grant funding, the school engaged consultants to help teachers learn the principles of effective literacy instruction. In the first year of the grant, teachers studied the principles and instructional strategies of the literacy model. Years Two and Three focused on in-class coaching, observation, and feedback. As an added benefit, on-staff literacy coordinators are available for continuing staff training and ongoing teacher observation and coaching, in order to assist teachers in practicing and applying the tenets of the program. In addition, teachers frequently observe other classrooms to glean tips about how to better implement the program's instructional strate-

gies. Focused dialogue surrounding these visits has become a part of the everyday work of faculty members.

Since implementing the program, there has been a dramatic shift in the way teachers and other staff members view professional development. According to Principal Colleen Model, prior to implementing this program, professional development was seen as something that was done a few days a year and that had little lasting effect. Now, she says, it's an ongoing process that occurs in the classroom, after school, during teacher observations, through book studies, and in dialogue.

Although the grant funding has for the most part been depleted, the Thermopolis School District is dedicated to sustaining the changes that this literacy professional development initiative has brought to classroom instruction. The district is committed to continue funding literacy coaches and eight staff development days per year. Teachers view this support as integral to sustaining and adapting the improvements made in their literacy instruction.

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