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Designing Effective Professional Development Considerations Packet

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Designing Effective Professional Development

This Considerations Packet provides essential information to educators interested in improving professional development practices. Topics include standards for designing professional development activities and programs that lead to improved learning for all students. An overview of basic information about the major models of professional development and their effectiveness is followed by specific strategies for determining if a school or school division is a learning organization. Finally, key questions for identifying indicators of effective professional development are also offered.

The Changing View of Professional Development

The field of education is constantly evolving and is rapidly expanding its knowledge base. New content knowledge and information about how students learn best is continually being discovered. In addition, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is requiring schools and school divisions to close the achievement gap between traditionally low-performing student groups, such as economically disadvantaged students, minority students, limited-English proficient students, and students with disabilities, and their peers. If education professionals are to keep pace with the knowledge needed to ensure that all students will achieve at high levels, they must be continuous learners throughout their careers (Guskey, 2000).

The traditional view of professional development as a series of three or four isolated workshop days in the summer, or as scattered events throughout the school year, limits learning opportunities for educators and makes it difficult to stay up-to-date with emerging information. In addition to the shift from isolated and unrelated events to a more comprehensive and strategic approach to delivering professional development, Sparks and Hirsh (1997) have identified the following changes that are occurring related to professional development:

Table 1
The Changing View of Staff Development

| FROM | TO |
|--|--|
| Individual development | Individual and organizational development |
| A focus on adult needs and satisfaction | A focus on student needs and learning outcomes, as well as changes in teaching behaviors |
| Training conducted away from the job as the primary delivery model | Many forms of job-embedded learning opportunities |
| “Experts” sharing knowledge and skills | Study by teachers of the teaching and learning process |
| A focus on general instructional skills | A combination of generic and content-specific instructional skills |
| Staff developers as trainers | Staff developers who provide consultation, planning, and facilitation in addition to training |
| Staff development provided by one or two departments | Staff development as a major function and responsibility of all administrators and teacher leaders |
| Staff development targeted primarily towards teachers | Continuous improvement in the performance of all who impact student learning (e.g., school board members, school and central office administrators, instructional and support staff) |

(Adapted from Sparks & Hirsch, 1997)

Furthermore, Joyce and Showers (2002) propose that sustained professional development that focuses on student achievement (e.g., curriculum-area topics, teaching strategies) will result in improved student outcomes. Consequently, the first steps toward designing effective professional development are: (a) Adopting a broader view of what types of activities constitute professional development and (b) Making a commitment to focus the content of professional development activities on teaching and learning as it relates to improved student achievement.

Standards for Professional Development

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has developed a comprehensive set of standards to assist teachers and administrators in designing professional development that improves the learning of all students (National Staff Development Council, 2001). The guiding questions that follow are adapted from the context, process, and content standards developed by NSDC. “Yes” answers to the questions in Table 2 indicate that the professional development program or activity is aligned with the 2001 NSDC Standards for Staff Development.

Table 2

Checklist for Alignment with NSDC Staff Development Standards

| Context Standards | | Yes | No |
|--|--|------------|-----------|
| Learning Communities: Does the professional development activity or program organize adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district? | | | |
| Leadership: Are there skillful school and district leaders who are guiding continuous instructional improvement? | | | |
| Resources: Are there resources to support adult learning and collaboration? | | | |
| Process Standards | | | |
| Data-Driven: Is disaggregated student data used to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement? | | | |
| Evaluation: Does the professional development activity or program prepare educators to apply research to decision making? | | | |
| Research-Based: Are multiple sources of information used to guide improvement and demonstrate the impact of the professional development activity or program? | | | |
| Design: Does the professional development activity or program use learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal? | | | |
| Learning: Does the professional development activity or program apply knowledge about human learning and change? | | | |
| Collaboration: Does the professional development activity or program provide educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate? | | | |
| Content Standards | | | |
| Equity: Does the professional development activity or program prepare educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement? | | | |
| Quality Teaching: Does the professional development activity or program deepen educators’ content knowledge, provide them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepare them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately? | | | |
| Family Involvement: Does the professional development activity or program provide educators with the knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately? | | | |

Models of Professional Development

Once the standards for effective professional development have been reviewed, administrators and other educators who design professional development experiences for their school or division should consider all of the major models of professional development before determining the most appropriate approach. The following models, adapted from Guskey (2000), are based upon the research of Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) and Drago-Severson (1994) as cited in Guskey (2000).

- **Training:** This model of professional development is the one with which most educators are familiar. Training is typically presented in the form of a workshop, seminar, or some other form of large-group presentation. In order to ensure a meaningful presentation, presenters and those responsible for planning and facilitating the training should collaboratively develop the training objectives that will guide the content of the training.
 - **Keys to Success:** In order for training sessions to have a lasting impact, there must be additional follow up activities or sessions to allow for feedback and coaching as the newly learned skill is implemented and refined. Such activities may involve peer observations or follow up sessions where participants meet again and assess the impact of the newly learned skill.

- **Observation/Assessment:** This model of professional development is based on the use of collegial observation and feedback to provide educators with information about a specific practice or skill. For teachers, such activities may involve peers observations of lesson design, instructional strategies, or classroom management. Administrators may choose to focus on the skills of master scheduling or instructional leadership. The model allows for both the observer and the person being observed to benefit from the observation and subsequent analysis of strengths and areas for possible improvement.
 - **Keys to Success:** For this model of professional development to be successful, it is important that the observation/assessment process be separate from the teacher evaluation process.

- **Involvement in a Development or Improvement Process:** Educators are often asked to serve on a curriculum committee or school improvement team. Such groups can provide a valuable source of professional growth as educators work collaboratively to solve a specific problem or review relevant research on a particular content area. Individuals working on development or improvement projects gain new knowledge and learn to appreciate different perspectives as they work with various people (e.g., administrators, parents, community members). Typically, educators involved in development or improvement processes have a strong interest in such projects and the work relates directly to their professional responsibilities.
 - **Keys to Success:** Those designing the process should make sure that participants have the information they need in order to make informed decisions. One way to do this is to create a knowledgeable team by including school-university partnerships or other collaborative relationships with representatives from institutions of higher education.

- **Study Groups:** Study groups expand upon the concept of the development and improvement processes by involving an entire school staff in finding solutions to common problems. Small groups of educators focus on different aspects of a problem or issue. Topics should arise out of a careful study of school data. Study groups may decide to focus on issues such as schoolwide discipline or character education.
 - **Keys to Success:** Designers should ensure that the groups are well organized with a clear focus and that group members have plenty of time to complete the tasks at hand.

- **Inquiry or Action Research:** In the inquiry or action research model, participants use a structured method to investigate how a change in a particular practice impacts teaching and learning. The inquiry/action research model characteristically includes five stages:
 - Identification of a problem or question of interest to all participants; meeting the needs of all learners by differentiating instruction for example.
 - Collection and analysis of information related to the problem or question, such as collecting student performance data in the classroom
 - Reviewing the pertinent professional literature and research results for the problem or topic
 - Determining action steps
 - Implementing the action steps and evaluating the results
 - **Keys to Success:** Individuals participating in this type of professional development must be willing to take initiative and commit time to the research. Knowledge of data-collection and analysis techniques, or guidance in the processes, also contribute to the success of this model of professional development.

- **Individually Guided Activities:** Educators involved in this model of professional development determine their own professional learning goals and select the activities they believe will lead them to successfully meet those goals. Steps in this process include:
 - Identification of a particular need or interest, such as improving integration of technology into instruction
 - Development of a plan to address the identified need or interest
 - Completion of learning activities
 - Assessment of whether the learning fulfilled the identified needs or activities
 This model of professional development provides for a variety of flexible options that enable educators to individualize their professional growth experiences. Activities such as professional portfolios, reflective journaling, and video/audio self-assessment are examples of individually guided activities.
 - **Keys to Success:** Educators involved with this model must make sure that they select challenging goals that are related to improving teaching and learning. They should also make sure that plans for specific opportunities for professional sharing are included.

- **Mentoring:** Mentoring as a model of professional development pairs experienced, successful educators with colleagues who are less experienced.
 - **Keys to Success:** Careful thought needs to be given to the mentor pair. Mentor teachers should be viewed as experts in their field and should have the ability and time to demonstrate, observe, and consult with new teachers regarding instructional issues. Finally, effective interpersonal and collaborative skills are also selection criteria that

will help ensure a successful mentoring relationship (Virginia Department of Education, 2000).

Certain delivery models are more appropriate than others for a given professional development outcome. Collins (2000) estimated the effectiveness of five different models of professional development as they relate to desired outcomes. For example, training with follow up activities has the highest level of effectiveness if it is selected as a delivery model when the desired outcomes are mastery of a simple, specific teaching skill, implementation of a complex set of teaching strategies, or mastery of new classroom management skills. Similarly, inquiry is preferred when the desired outcome is gaining insight into how students learn or when solving a complex problem dealing with improving student achievement. Table 3 outlines a variety of outcomes for professional learning and their estimated effectiveness.

Table 3*Effectiveness Estimates for Five Models of Professional Development*

| Desired Outcome | Training | Observation/ Assessment | Development/ Improvement Processes | Inquiry | Individually Guided Activities |
|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| Mastery of a simple, specific teaching skill | Highest: Recommended components make it very effective | High: Adding peer coaching can increase application to 90% | Low: Better suited for broader outcomes | Medium: Less efficient than other models | Medium: Requires more time to plan than other models |
| Implementation of a complex set of teaching strategies | Highest: More complex outcomes make follow up more important | Medium: Harder to observe complex strategies | Medium: Less efficient than other models | High: Adding peer coaching can increase application to 90% | Medium: Less efficient than other models |
| Gaining insight into how students learn | Medium: Less efficient than other models | Low: Focuses on observing teachers' behavior, not students' | Medium: Less efficient than other models | Highest: Effective in testing hypotheses | Medium: Includes professional reading, observation of students |
| Mastery of new classroom management skills | Highest: Recommended components make it very effective | High: Adding peer coaching can increase application to 90% | Low: Better suited for broader outcomes | High: Adding peer coaching can increase application to 90% | Medium: Less efficient than other models |
| Implementation of new assessment procedures | Highest: Recommended components make it very effective | Medium: Assessment procedures are not always observable | Medium: Less efficient than other models | High: Effective, but time-consuming | Medium: Includes collaboration with others |
| Solving a complex problem dealing with improving student achievement | Low: Better suited for supporting implementation than creating new knowledge | Low: Better suited for giving feedback than problem solving | Medium: Can be adapted to problem-solving tasks | Highest: Effective in solving complex problems; generates a great deal of learning | High: Flexibility allows activities to be designed specifically for this outcome |
| Acquiring group leadership skills/working as a team to solve a problem | Low: Better suited for supporting implementation than building leadership skills | Low: These skills developed outside the classroom, less observable | Highest: Leadership opportunities abound in this model | Medium: Less efficient than other models | Medium: Allows group members to learn what they need, when they need to know it |
| Increasing knowledge of content or subject matter | High: Effective in helping teachers acquire new knowledge, especially in applying it | Low: Focuses on teachers' behavior, not content knowledge | Highest: Important element is acquiring new knowledge to solve a problem or meet a specific need | Medium: Less efficient than other models, focus is on creating new knowledge, not acquiring new knowledge | Medium: Include professional reading and contact with subject matter experts |

(Adapted from Collins, 2000)

The Importance of Learning Organizations

Professional learning communities offer promise for initiating and maintaining the structures and culture needed to support effective professional development (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Professional learning communities have at their core:

- ❑ Shared mission, vision, and values
- ❑ Collective inquiry
- ❑ Collaborative teams
- ❑ Action orientation
- ❑ Willingness to experiment
- ❑ Commitment to continuous improvement
- ❑ Focus on results

Guskey's (2000) four principles of effective professional development-focus on learning and learners, an emphasis on individual and organizational change, small changes guided by grand vision, and ongoing, embedded professional learning-can all be met through the creation of professional learning communities.

Ten Ways to Tell If a School Is a Learning Organization

Administrators and teachers in charge of designing effective professional development for their schools can ask the following questions to determine if their school is a learning organization. Presented together, these elements indicate a school that is operating as a learning organization:

1. Does the school have an incentive structure that encourages individuals to adapt their behavior?
2. Does the school have challenging but achievable goals that are shared by the stakeholders?
3. Can members of the school accurately communicate the changes they are trying to make and where they are in the process?
4. Does the school gather, process, and act upon information in a variety of ways that are appropriate for the purpose at hand?
5. Is there an institutional knowledge base at the school and are processes in place for creating new ideas?
6. Does the school share information with parents and community stakeholders?
7. Does the school receive feedback on how it is serving students and parents?
8. Does the school constantly refine its basic processes such as communication, gathering and using data, creating new ideas, etc.?
9. Does the school have a supportive organizational culture in place that includes warm relationships, collaborative opportunities, and the needed tools and support for teachers?

10. Is the school an “open system” that is sensitive to the surrounding environment, including social, political, and economic contexts? (Adapted from Brandt, 2003)

Key Ideas for Effective Professional Development

Educators should keep the following key ideas in mind as they evaluate current professional development activities and pursue new initiatives (adapted from Collins, 2000):

- ❑ Adult learners learn best when they work with colleagues to develop solutions to collective concerns. When support is provided after implementation, adult learners are able to achieve at high levels.
- ❑ Change is not a one-time event but a process, and individuals progress through change in a predictable sequence. Effective professional development provides support to individuals based upon their immediate concerns. Beninghof and Singer (1998) recommend following the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) developed by Hall, Wallace, and Dossett (1973). This tool identifies an individual’s need for staff development from the awareness stage to the refocusing stage, allowing the most appropriate staff development activities to be determined. Following is a list of the stages of concern:
 - ❑ **Stage 0/Awareness** – Very low level of involvement. This is the staff member who has not heard of the word *inclusion*.
 - ❑ **Stage 1/Informational** – General awareness and interest, but still relatively uninvolved. This is a staff member who realizes that something to do with inclusion is going on in the building or district, but does not believe it will affect him or her.
 - ❑ **Stage 2/Personal** – Beginning consideration of the personal impact of the innovation. This is the staff member who is beginning to worry that he or she may be asked to include students with disabilities in his or her classroom.
 - ❑ **Stage 3/Management** – Concern focuses on efficient and effective methodologies. This is the staff member who has been given a class list that includes several students with disabilities and who now is determined to find out what to do.
 - ❑ **Stage 4/Consequence** – Attention to student outcomes and accountability. This is the staff member who, after including students for a short period, begins to raise questions about outcomes, fairness, progress, evaluation, and/or success.
 - ❑ **Stage 5/Collaboration** – Focus on working with others involved with the change. This is the staff member who recognizes that colleagues, especially those with inclusion experience, may be able to help.
 - ❑ **Stage 6/Refocusing** – Interest in refinement, improvement, and innovation. This is the staff member who, with some successful experience behind him or her, is ready to make the situation even better.

- Content for professional development pursuits should be thoughtfully selected. Selection should be based upon:
 - A proven research base that shows improvement in student learning
 - A review of the program or practice to ensure that it makes sense to teachers
 - The content's suitability for meeting student and teacher needs
 - The content's fit with practices, programs, and policies already in place in the school division

- The models of professional development each have strengths and weaknesses. No matter which model is selected, the activities should:
 - Focus on narrowing the gap between actual and desired levels of student achievement
 - Involve stakeholders in identifying content and objectives
 - Help participants understand both the theoretical and the practical aspects of the new learning
 - Integrate follow up and support
 - Be part of a larger change process that focuses on improving student achievement

- Effective collaboration is more likely to occur when colleagues share responsibility for major teaching and learning tasks, support one another using coaching strategies, view their work as meaningful and challenging, and accept the fact that groups become more effective over time.

- Educators should use data throughout the process to identify an area of improvement, select a solution, implement it, and assess the results.

- Professional development activities that enhance teacher learning, and in turn student achievement, provide opportunities for teachers to be involved in leadership roles that expand personal responsibility for professional learning and contribute to a collective responsibility for improved student achievement. Activities such as peer coaching, study groups, and action research all provide ways for teachers to act as leaders and contribute to the development of a professional learning community.

- Additional time is needed for participation in high-quality professional development activities. Stakeholders should look for creative ways to build in blocks of uninterrupted time for job-embedded inquiry.

- Teachers, administrators, and school divisions share the responsibility for professional development and should work together to ensure that plans are connected across levels and across initiatives in order to make them more effective and successful.

Conclusion

The strategies shared in this *Considerations Packet* provide those responsible for designing professional development experiences the means to ensure that teachers and administrators engage in sustained professional learning that specifically focuses on the improvement of the teaching and learning process rather than jumping on the latest educational bandwagon. Schmoker (2002) states that the formula for improving school and student performance is really quite simple. According to Schmoker, positive results are nearly unavoidable when teachers:

- ❑ Use the assessed standards as their focal point
- ❑ Review student achievement data to set a small number of measurable achievement goals in low-scoring areas
- ❑ Regularly work in a collaborative fashion to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies targeted directly at the low-scoring areas

Effective professional development activities and programs help teachers to learn about effective instructional strategies and then design, adapt, and assess the success of the strategies in their particular setting, thus ensuring that the academic needs of all students are being met.

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Additional Resources

Resources on professional development are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Visit our web site at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php> for a complete listing of all of our materials, which can be requested on-line. Enter *Staff Development* or *Administrative Leadership/Reform* as the subject of your search.

This *Considerations Packet* was prepared by Lee Anne Sulzberger, July 2003