

## Supporting quality staff development with best-practice aligned policies

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Higher accountability for student learning requires that districts and schools reflect on how they can maximize teacher growth and student achievement. Professional development provides an avenue to meet both of these goals. A recent development that has grown from an increased focus on quality professional development is the implementation of instructional coaching programs. The focus of this article is on how to support an instructional coaching model with staff development aligned with current staff development best practice.

*Keywords: staff development, instructional coaches, best practice, policy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Research on professional development has failed to provide ample evidence that supports the effectiveness of professional development for increasing teacher instructional skill and student learning. The absence of supportive comprehensive policies design, delivery, and evaluation of professional development is often reported as a factor in this ineffectiveness. Church (2009) maintained that professional development programs should meet the varied needs of staff and support effective professional development practices. This article provides guidance for the design of on-target, on-time and ongoing supportive professional development policies. These policies will increase teacher instructional skill and student learning.

Danielson (2006) described the ineffectiveness of past professional development practices, including one-time workshops and university courses, concluding that these approaches do little to influence classroom practice. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) found that much of the staff development was ineffective because the professional development was created and delivered by someone from outside of the organization to a group of teachers who listened in a passive manner.

Lieberman (1995) noted parallels between how students learn and how teachers learn, and he advanced that teachers must be engaged in learning that involves working with others in a practical way and that engages them in problem solving. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) suggested a paradigm shift in staff development and provided 11 major shifts that should be made to move away from the less effective traditional approach. Seven (7) of these shifts relate to areas that should be addressed in effective professional development policies. These shifts included expanding professional development rather than the district, ensuring job-embedded learning, to

include organizational development, focusing on the school allowing teachers to be the experts, including content-specific skills, exploring new roles for teacher leaders, and focusing on continuous improvement. These shifts align the focus of professional development to be rooted in improving teacher strategies and student learning.

### EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The approach to professional development that accompanied the reform movements of the 1990s and early 2000s required a more purposeful and strategic approach to professional development. Sparks (1997) identified the need for a shift from a fragmented, last-minute approach to a clear and coherent plan guided by the district's strategic plan. Sparks observed this shift has forced the curriculum and staff development departments of school districts to become support departments for schools, instead of offering standard professional development to all buildings.

Research on effective professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little, 1993; Harrison & Killian, 2007, Sparks & Hirsh, 2000) identified common components that should be evident in a district's professional development program. Professional development should reflect the following principles:

1. The professional development should provide teachers with opportunities for collaboration and coaching.
2. The participants should be actively engaged in reflection, inquiry, research, and collective problem solving.
3. The professional development should be grounded in instructional practices, assessments, and results specific to the participants' content area or school improvement process.
4. The professional development should be ongoing, sustained, rigorous, and job-embedded.

5. The participants should have the necessary resources and opportunities to grow and learn effectively.

Guskey (2003) analyzed 13 different lists of characteristics of effective staff development from a variety of organizations and publications. Guskey found that the lists were inconsistent and at times contradictory and recommended more consistent and defined criteria were needed. Guskey concluded that there was not a common and accepted set of guidelines for implementing effective professional development.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) is an internationally recognized professional organization dedicated to the implementation of effective staff development. The NSDC developed a set of national standards for institutions to follow in 1995. In 2000, Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of NSDC, and Stephanie Hirsh, Associate Executive Director of NSDC, released a national plan for improving staff development. Sparks and Hirsh (2000) called for a renewed focus on the importance of professional development in relation to teacher quality and student learning. The plan laid out the required changes that would be necessary to improve professional development nation wide and encouraged the analysis and measurement of the quality of professional development. The plan became the foundation for the revised standards in 2001.

The revised 2001 NSDC standards identify three sub-sets of standards. Context standards establish the importance for teachers to be actively involved in the design of the professional development. The process standards identify the types of activities in which teachers should immerse themselves to improve student learning. The content standards reflect the additional need for teachers to participate in professional development that is specific to their students, content, and community. These standards provide a foundation and framework for the delivery of effective professional development that is aligned to current research.

Through their research, WestED (*Teachers Who Learn, Kids Who Achieve*, 2000) found both internal and external factors in eight award-winning schools that had model professional development. The internal factors revolved around a culture of learning that existed in each of the schools. The book highlighted six internal components of this culture of learning: “student-centered goals, an expanded definition of professional development, ongoing job-embedded informal learning, a collaborative environment, time for learning and collaboration, and checking for results” (p. 12). Additionally, three factors from outside the schools were identified that supported the development and sustainability of the culture of learning: “external call to action, partnerships with external programs, and the allocation of fiscal resources” (pp. 39-44).

The structure of professional development must also be considered in this new vision of professional development. Birman, Desimone, Porter, and Garet (2000) conducted a survey of more than 1,000 teachers who were part of the federal government’s Eisenhower Professional Development Program. From a review of the research and the survey data, the researchers identified three structural features that set the context for professional development and three core features that characterized the processes that occurred during a professional development activity. The structural features that were identified were (a) Form: how the activity was structured, either as a reform activity or more like a traditional workshop or conference; (b) Duration: how long the activity lasted and how long the participants worked on the activity; (c) Participation: what the teachers who participated had in common, or whether they worked individually or collaboratively. The three core features that were found to be effective were: (a) Content focus: how the activity deepened the content knowledge of the participant; (b) Active learning: the level of engagement of teachers in the meaningful analysis of teaching and learning; and (c) Coherence: how well the activities integrated into a larger program of teacher learning. The study found that the activities that were high in the three core features were more likely to be carried into the classroom and more effective in improving student achievement (Birman et al., 2000).

Research on the characteristics and components of effective professional development is abundant. However, response to current theory also requires changes in the structure and delivery of professional development. These changes create a climate from which new models of professional development can be grown. Districts and organizations also have invested a great deal more human and financial capital in chasing the promise of effective professional development. Therefore, measuring the influence and success of professional development is crucial to ensuring its effectiveness. While the process is essential, effectively and appropriately evaluating professional development can be a daunting task (Church, 2009).

#### EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Increased accountability in education does not stop in the classroom. Nearly every educational reform includes an investment in professional development as a key component of implementation. Therefore, the need to ensure that the professional development provided to the participants is effective, has become greater. Guskey and Sparks (1991) explained that it is not adequate simply to document that training occurred or to ask teachers how they felt after an activity was completed. Guskey (2000) indicated that focusing only on the documentation of shallow evaluations that cover

too short a time period has been a common mistake in the design of previous professional development evaluations. While the author recognized that evaluating professional development is complex, evaluation is identified as essential to the improvement and success of the professional development.

Guskey (2000) provided practical guidelines for evaluating professional development and divided the evaluations into five critical levels: participants' reactions, participants' learning, organizational support and change, participants' use of new knowledge, and student learning outcomes. He went on to explain that each of the levels has specific types of evaluations that should be used to provide unique information to the planners of the professional development.

1. Level 1 evaluations should simply measure the participant's reactions to a specific activity.
2. Level 2 evaluations should focus on whether participants met the goals of the professional development activity. This requires that the objectives of the professional development be clear at the beginning of the activity and that the evaluations be developed prior to the activity.
3. Level 3 evaluations should focus more on the culture of the organization and the supports in place to promote professional development. These evaluations should not be about a specific activity, but instead about the organization or professional development structure as a whole. Evaluation results should provide the organization with information specific to the support and change necessary for all forms of professional development.
4. Level 4 evaluations should identify how much the participants use the new knowledge and skills that they learned.
5. Level 5 reviews ask what ultimate effect the teaching had on student learning (Guskey, 2000).

In all levels of professional development evaluation, the teacher is a key component of the evaluation. In levels 1 and 2, the teachers provide feedback on their reactions to the activities and explain what they learned from the activities. Guskey (2000) recommended that the questions provided to the participant should address the three areas the National Staff Development Council identified for their standards: content, context, and process. In level 3, the teachers provide feedback about the culture of the organization specific to professional development. Hirsh (2006), Spicer (2008) and the NSDC, extended Guskey's research by developing a teacher questionnaire that could serve as a Level 3 evaluation for organizations around the NSDC standards. In levels 4 and 5, the professional development is evaluated based on the teachers' implementation of what has been learned and the ultimate result of their teaching specific to student achievement (Guskey, 2000). Therefore, teachers' perceptions

of professional development are critical at evaluation levels 1, 2, and 3 to assess the effectiveness of a professional development program.

## CONCLUSION

This article provides information to schools or districts that are considering the creation of professional development policies or are trying to evaluate their current programs. Higher accountability for student learning requires that districts and schools increase teacher skill. Comprehensive district professional development policies that are aligned with the current best practice in professional development provide an avenue to do just that.

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