



Professional Development

Defining, understanding, implementing and supporting
quality growth amongst educators

A White Paper

June, 2009

Mrs. Educator graduated with a degree in early childhood education and began teaching fifth grade in a small southern school system. After a year she moved to the largest school system in the state to teach the same subject. Once four years had passed, Mrs. Educator decided to become a full-time mother once she learned of her upcoming pregnancy with her first child. After two additional children and being away from the classroom for nine years, she decided to reenter the profession and became a Title 1 math teacher in a small school system. While away from teaching, certain processes, procedures, requirements and expectations had changed dramatically. No Child Left Behind legislation had been enacted, new technology expectations were required, and the entire process of schooling had experienced large-scale reform. Feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and frustration became commonplace immediately after returning. After being gone from education for nine years, Mrs. Educator was the one “left behind”...

While details of this true story may vary from person to person, it is most likely a common scenario facing many educators. Whether they have been gone from teaching and



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return, or they have remained in teaching for years, but have been faced with changing expectations and mandates, students with different backgrounds and challenges, or even advances in technology, the same feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and frustration can be present. Therefore, what can be done to instill in these individuals a sense of confidence, capability and success? Much of the answer can be found in quality professional development.

The National Staff Development Council (2009) defines professional development as “a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement.” Used synonymously for the purpose of this study, the goal of professional learning or professional development is to “help educators develop the knowledge, skills, behavior, and insights needed to become effective classroom teachers and school leaders” (North Carolina Professional Development Standards, n.d.). Common threads between the above definitions and many other definitions include words such as improve, develop and effective. Therefore, success with any professional learning lies with educators becoming more effective through the development of new skills, along with the enhancement of existing skills, culminating with improved student achievement.

The critical nature and importance of professional learning is both evident and advocated by the U.S. Department of Education, all 50 State Departments of Education, State certification agencies, and local boards of education. Additionally, the immense and assorted amount of educational research on the topic from top researchers such as Rebecca and Richard



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DuFour, Robert Eaker, Michael Fullan, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Robert Marzano, points to its critical nature in the betterment of students, teachers, and our schools as a whole.

Therefore, what topics do most professional learning activities focus on, what are the most common approaches or methods used for professional learning, and how can quality professional learning be supported in schools?

Topics for professional learning can be vast and determined by educators themselves, school or district administration, or even state government agencies. In a 2004 U.S. Department of Education study (as cited in Teacher Magazine, 2007), the topic with the greatest percent (23.4%) related directly to the subject matter the participant taught. Next, 17.7% dealt with topics related to student discipline and management. Third and fourth, 14.8% and 14.2% respectively, were teaching students with special needs and the use of technology in instruction. The last five areas in order, which were all less than 10%, involved topics focused on content standards within the subject matter of the participant, methods of teaching, teaching students with limited-English proficiency, student assessment, and other. Thus, topics are wide-ranging and address the needs of students within numerous areas.

The approaches and methods used for professional learning are equally as vast. Methods can be used to assist with both short term and long term initiatives, they can address individuals or groups, and can be delivered through face-to-face or electronic settings at the school, one's home or another location. The most common approaches of conducting



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professional learning are through graduate coursework, attending conferences and workshops, conducting action research, mentoring and observing, and through study groups or professional learning communities. Most educators are exposed to a variety of approaches throughout their career and each approach can have varying degrees of success based on multiple factors. Research is clear, however, that “one-shot” approaches are ineffective over the long-term. Job-embedded, on-going professional learning has the greatest impact upon sustained teacher change and increased student learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Quality is key among professional learning and on-going support is crucial to its success.

Support of professional learning is instrumental in assisting educators and impacting the students we serve. According to Huebner’s research (2009), and many other supporting studies, there are two levels at which schools can support teacher learning: 1) by providing messages to teachers through multiple means, such as in print (both offline and online), in one-on-one interactions, and in small and large groups; and 2) by grounding teacher learning in examples of practice, such as through peer observations or examination of student work. Ironically, these support steps are similar in nature to the process educators should use with students. First, efforts should be made to accommodate different learning styles by using a variety of methods. Secondly, students and teachers alike should have opportunities to practice their learning and receive feedback that is both concrete and specific. These two levels



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of support offer both teachers and students the chance to share and learn from others, while enhancing their practice and becoming more efficient.

In conclusion, quality professional development takes time and effort. Multiple approaches can be used, but only those approaches which: 1) consider the needs of educators; 2) are job embedded; 3) are on-going; 4) are collaborative; 5) incorporate different learning methods; and 5) provide feedback, are the most effective. Quality growth and learning amongst educators can be achieved, and that benefits everyone.

References

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