



INFORMATION CAPSULE

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HIGH QUALITY STAFF DEVELOPMENT

At A Glance

Staff development programs must be different than those that have been offered in the past. Instead of passive, one to two day experiences that focus on "safe" topics, the new programs must focus on content knowledge and instructional skills and be sustained and rigorous enough to produce lasting change. School systems can begin planning their professional development programs by articulating a vision of what the organization will look like when it's operating at its peak and by committing to new ways of thinking and behaving in order to realize this vision. Successful staff development programs focus on student learning goals and are matched to the instructional practices used in the schools. They are results-driven and based on performance standards for both students and teachers. To be successful, professional development programs must be job-embedded and team based and include the provision of follow-up support over a sustained period of time.

This Information Capsule synthesizes material from "Focusing Staff Development on Improving the Learning of All Students" as written by Dennis Sparks in *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement, Third Edition*, published by Educational Research Service, 2002.

High quality staff development is viewed as essential if teachers are to consistently apply research-based strategies in their classrooms. Staff development must not only affect educators' knowledge, practices, and attitudes, but must also alter the culture and structure of the school system. In other words, staff development should be significantly different than approaches used in the past if it is to be successful in producing high levels of learning for both students and staff.

A widely held belief is that professional development often fails to produce lasting improvements because teachers are resistant to change; however, a bigger problem appears to be the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence that results when teachers implement the many different innovations they encounter in their professional development experiences. Furthermore, staff

development is often a dull and passive experience for many teachers. The majority of staff development activities focus on “safe” topics, such as communicating with parents, student self-esteem, or teacher morale, instead of on content knowledge and instructional skills. The small amount of staff development that does focus on instructional knowledge and skills is usually not rigorous or sustained enough to produce lasting change.

Dr. Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has described a new kind of staff development that is sustained, rigorous, and focused on increased levels of learning for all students.

School systems can begin planning their professional development programs by articulating a vision for their schools and committing to deep change in order to realize this vision. When school systems commit to deep change, they must commit to new ways of thinking and behaving. Setting goals that staff don't yet know how to accomplish (called “stretch goals”) can be a powerful motivator for comprehensive change.

The elements of a successful staff development program, as outlined by Dr. Sparks, include the following:

- **Begin with a clear sense of what students need to learn and be able to do.** Ambitious intentions for students provide a powerful rationale for staff development. A clear sense of what students need to learn drives decisions about the curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments.

Staff development must be results-driven, with its success measured by increases in teacher knowledge and improvements in student learning, instead of by continuing education points earned for attendance at workshops. Effective results-driven staff development requires the use of various sources of performance data for decision making and program evaluation. According to Sparks, teachers' pay should be based on demonstrated knowledge and skills as opposed to longevity and university credits earned.

- **Based on standards for student learning, teaching, and staff development.** Standards for student learning provide the rationale for new forms of staff development. Standards for teachers provide the benchmark for instruction and a focus on what teachers must learn to be successful. Standards for staff development provide a means for school systems to evaluate the quality of their efforts and make adjustments when necessary.
- **Focus on student learning goals that are based on the unique strengths and challenges faced by the particular school community.** School districts' learning goals should reflect high expectations for both students and staff.

The primary objectives of professional development should be to improve teachers' content knowledge and instructional skills and to provide opportunities for interdependent efforts that will lead to the successful achievement of the learning goals.

District staff must help principals and teachers articulate, communicate, and sustain the school system's vision. All schools should have the same vision since school systems serve a community, not isolated sets of parents and student. School systems must develop the capacity to act strategically and to stop unnecessary activities that are promoted by constituencies whose interests may be threatened.

- **Use Job-embedded and team based Approach.** Teachers' professional development is most meaningful when it takes place within professional communities. Teachers learn by studying, doing, reflecting, and collaborating. Although workshops and courses have an important place in comprehensive staff development, a great deal of learning occurs as teachers face the daily challenges of their work.

The core staff development process occurs among small groups of 8 to 12 teachers who share a grade level or subject area specialization or who are engaged in interdisciplinary teaching. This group meets several hours each week to refine their lessons, review student work, and

discuss ways in which instruction can be improved. The team makes its decisions based on data and research. Although the vast majority of their professional learning occurs in this small group setting, they also attend workshops and institutes, serve as mentors and coaches, and invite consultants to meet with their group to teach a skill, provide feedback, or engage in problem solving.

- **Build on a core set of ideas and beliefs.** Although actions are important, the thinking that influences and shapes that action is also critical. Existing ideas and beliefs influence the way we think and have a strong effect on instructional practices, but are often ignored in staff development activities. Ideas about the nature of learning, teaching, and leadership must be fully explored in professional development programs by all members of the school community.
- **Match the instructional processes desired by schools.** Schools that want their students involved in certain types of learning should provide opportunities for teachers to learn through similar means and produce comparable products. For example, schools that desire constructivist teaching, in which students are viewed as constructors of their own knowledge systems, should provide staff development that models constructivist practices.

Professional development must address teachers' understanding of the nature of knowledge and students' role in learning, how these concepts are manifested in teaching and classwork, and processes for assessing student learning.

- **Focus on content.** Teachers need opportunities to acquire a deeper understanding of the content they are teaching. They should be taught by teachers who model instructional practices appropriate to that content. This learning can occur through professional networking, professional assessments, teacher academies, case discussions, peer review, coaching, and mentoring.

- **Change the organization's structure and culture.** Organizations must continually adapt through the learning of their members. A school district's culture promotes certain behaviors and inhibits others. Staff development must recognize that structural and cultural factors surrounding professional learning influence individual performance and can either support or hinder staff development efforts.

Schools must engage in organizational development activities. Organizational development is the process of planned change in which change is defined and owned by the school system. It's a long-term, systematic process, not a one-time intervention, and it is based on continual data collection, analysis, and feedback. Organizational development activities improve the school system's capacity to solve future problems.

All parts of the educational system (classrooms, schools, and school systems) must be interconnected. Decisions and actions in one part of the system affect other parts and the system as a whole. Too often, a "project mentality" isolates parts of the school system for special attention and professional development while ignoring the remainder of the system.

- **Use well-designed and follow-up support over a sustained period of time.** Poorly designed training programs and a lack of follow-up activities are the main reasons new practices are not implemented by teachers. Major innovations may require 10 to 15 days of training, not the one or two days typically provided.

Teachers must acquire a deep understanding of the theoretical base of a new skill and view numerous demonstrations of the skill. Research shows that teachers require about 20 demonstrations of a strategy, about half of which should be videotapes of students. Demonstrations should be followed by practice with feedback and coaching.

A large increase in the transfer of learning occurs when in-class coaching is added to the initial

training experience. This follow-up support enhances teachers' fluency with the new skill, improves their executive control over its use, and increases their confidence as they integrate the skill with their ongoing instructional practices.

- **Provide generous amounts of time for collaborative work and various learning activities.** Teachers need more than a few staff development days and brief meetings to engage in the collegial learning and planning that are essential to successful training programs. They must be given additional time to master their subjects, design learning experiences for students, use improved assessment systems, and work with colleagues.

The greatest barrier to providing time for teacher development is the uncertainty about what to do with students while teachers are

away from their classrooms. Schools must find academically productive ways in which students can spend the equivalent of one day per week away from their regular teachers without placing a financial burden on the school system. Suggestions for finding additional time for staff development include:

- Better use of existing time in faculty and department meetings.
- Schoolwide community service projects that free most of the school's staff for collaborative work.
- School-based extracurricular activities.
- Course-related projects.
- Extending the school day for a few minutes four days per week with early release on the fifth day.
- Adjustments in the master schedule to accommodate team meetings during the day.

Source: Sparks, Dennis. Focusing Staff Development on Improving the Learning of All Students. In Cawelti, Gordon, editor. *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement, Third Edition*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service, 2002, p. 245-255.