EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS

For students to gain mastery of challenging content, employ problem-solving skills, communicate, collaborate, and become independent and self-directed learners, teachers must utilize more sophisticated forms of teaching. These are twenty-first-century skills that are demanded by the workplace and society. Effective professional development (PD) is key to teachers learning and refining the pedagogies required to teach these important readiness skills.

What constitutes effective professional development? How do we deliver professional development to adult learners who are busy or feel besieged by varying educational initiatives?

We define effective professional development as structured professional learning that results in *changes in teacher practices* and *improvements in student learning outcomes*. Student learning is the primary focus of professional development.

Educators want to see the relevance and direct application of professional development to their job. They need to know why the information is important to them and what they will gain from the learning process. As learners, they value intrinsic motivation such as job competency or professional growth. According to Zepeda (2012), teachers will not thrive in a learning environment that maintains the "status quo" (p. 3). Rather, they want conversations and opportunities to engage in practices that will inform their work with students in meaningful ways.

To define features of effective PD, we conducted an extensive literature search and found many common elements. Effective professional development for educators:

- Is content focused: PD focuses on teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content that supports learning within teachers' classroom contexts. This element includes an intentional focus on discipline-specific curriculum development and pedagogies.

- Incorporates active learning: Active learning engages teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, providing them an opportunity to engage or practice in the same style of learning they are designing for their students. Such PD uses authentic artifacts, interactive activities, and other strategies to provide deeply embedded, highly contextualized professional learning. Adult educators learn new information and skills best when they are presented from the context of experience-oriented learning situations.

- Supports collaboration: High-quality PD creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school, and/or district.

- Uses models of effective practice: Curricular models and modeling of instruction provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Teachers may view models that include lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of teachers engaged in teaching, and video or written cases of teaching.

- Provides coaching and support: Coaching and support involve the sharing of expertise about content and evidence-based practices, focused directly on teachers' individual needs. Teachers want opportunities to learn alongside their peers. They crave professional conversations and shared experiences that can inform their practice.

- Offers feedback and reflection: High-quality professional learning frequently provides built-in time for teachers to think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback. Feedback and reflection both help teachers to thoughtfully move toward the expert visions of practice.

- Is of sustained duration: Effective PD provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice. Effective PD provides not only for follow-up but also for opportunities for revision.

Professional learning communities are an example of a PD model that incorporates several of these elements effectively and supports student learning gains. Professional learning communities are sustainable, collaborative, and job-embedded. They can be a source of efficacy and confidence for teachers and can result in widespread improvement within and beyond the school level.

Research has established that the educational system within which PD occurs has implications for its effectiveness. Specifically, conditions for teaching and learning both within schools and at the system level can inhibit the effectiveness of PD. For example, inadequate resourcing for PD—including needed curriculum materials, failure to align policies toward a coherent set of practices, a negative climate or challenging time constraints that do not promote nor value opportunities for professional growth—are all deterrents to effective professional development.

Professional development matters. Schools that are successful recognize that every participant in the school is a learner and that learning is a continual process. Great schools create nurturing environments where exemplary teaching is encouraged to flourish and grow.

Sources:

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