

Why Professional Development for Teachers is Critical

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Great teachers help create great students. In fact, research shows that an inspiring and informed teacher is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement, so it is critical to pay close attention to how we train and support both new and experienced educators.

Teacher Preparation

The best teacher-preparation programs emphasize subject-matter mastery and provide many opportunities for student teachers to spend time in real classrooms under the supervision of an experienced mentor. Just as professionals in medicine, architecture, and law have opportunities to learn through examining case studies, learning best practices, and participating in internships, exemplary teacher-preparation programs allow teacher candidates the time to apply their learning of theory in the context of teaching in a real classroom.

Many colleges and universities are revamping their education schools to include an emphasis on content knowledge, increased use of educational technologies, creation of professional-development schools, and innovative training programs aimed at career switchers and students who prefer to earn a degree online.

Teacher-Induction Programs

Support for beginning teachers is often uneven and inadequate. Even if well prepared, new teachers often are assigned to the most challenging schools and classes with little supervision and support. Nearly half of all teachers leave the profession in their first five years, so more attention must be paid to providing them with early and adequate support, especially if they are assigned to demanding school environments.

Mentoring and coaching from veteran colleagues is critical to the successful development of a new teacher. Great induction programs create opportunities for novice teachers to learn from best practices and analyze and reflect on their teaching.

Ongoing Professional Development

It is critical for veteran teachers to have ongoing and regular opportunities to learn from each other. Ongoing professional development keeps teachers up-to-date on new research on how children learn, emerging technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources, and more. The best professional development is ongoing, experiential, collaborative, and connected to and derived from working with students and understanding their culture.

Educators must understand the concepts in processing professional development and what it means to education. The National Staff Development Council (2007) created a set of nine standards that all professional development should follow. They include content knowledge and quality teaching, research-basis, collaboration, diverse learning needs, student learning environments, family involvement, evaluation, data-driven design, and teacher learning.

However, it does not determine whether accountable measures are being gathered to determine if this information has benefited the education system as a whole.

Professional development refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role. According to Glattenhorn (1987), by gaining increased experience in one's teaching role they systematically gain increased experience in their professional growth through examination of their teaching ability. Professional workshops and other formally related meetings are a part of the professional development experience (Ganzer, 2000). Much broader in scope than career development, professional development is defined as a growth that occurs through the professional cycle of a teacher (Glattenhorn, 1987). Moreover, professional development and other organized in-service programs are designed to foster the growth of teachers that can be used for their further development (Crowther et al, 2000). One must examine the content of those experiences through which the process will occur and how it will take place (Ganzer, 2000; Guskey, 2000).

This perspective, in a way, is new to teaching in that professional development and in-service training simply consisted of workshops or short term courses that offered teachers new information on specific aspects of their work (Brookfield, 2005). Champion (2003) posited that regular opportunities and experiences for professional development over the past few years had yielded systematic growth and development in the teaching profession.

Many have referred to this dramatic shift as a new image or a new module of teacher education for professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Walling & Lewis, 2000). In the past 15 years there have been standards-based movements for reform (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1993; Hord, 2004; Kedzior&Fifield, 2004; Sparks, 2002). The key component of this reform effort has been that effective professional development has created a knowledge base that has helped to transform and restructure quality schools (Guskey, 1995; Willis, 2000).

Much of the available research on professional development involves its relationship to student achievement. Researchers differ on the degree of this relationship. Variables are the school, teacher, student level related to the level of learning within the classroom, parent and community involvement, instructional strategies, classroom management, curriculum design, student background knowledge, and student motivation (Marzano, 2003). Based upon a review of several studies, Marzano (2003) concluded that the professional development activities experienced by teachers have a similar impact on student achievement to those of the aforementioned variables.

Opportunities for active learning, content knowledge, and the overall coherence of staff development are the top three characteristics of professional development. Opportunities for active learning and content specific strategies for staff development refer to a focus on teacher application of learned material. Overall coherence refers to the staff development program perceived as an integrated whole and development activities building upon each other in a consecutive fashion. Marzano (2003) warned, however, that standardized staff development activities which do not allow for effective application would be ineffective in changing teacher behavior.

Richardson, (2003) published a list of characteristics associated with effective professional development, stating that such programs would optimally be:

“statewide, long term with follow-up; encourage collegiality; foster agreement among participants on goals and visions; have a supportive administration; have access to adequate funds for materials, outside speakers, substitute teachers, and so on; encourage and develop agreement among participants; acknowledge participants existing beliefs and practices; and make use of outside facilitator/staff developers.” (p. 402)

Kedzior and Fifield (2004) described effective professional development as a prolonged facet of classroom instruction that is integrated, logical and on-going and incorporates experiences that are consistent with teachers’ goals; aligned with standards, assessments, other reform initiatives, and beset by the best research evidence. Elmore (2002) described professional development as sustained focus over time that is consistent with best practice.

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