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Five Tools for Collaborative Professional Development

Effective professional development is an essential part of every school improvement effort. Traditionally, professional development has included workshops, seminars, courses, and conferences. These types of activities have varied in terms of effectiveness, and often fall short of producing desired results. Contemporary notions of professional development, while still including traditional choices, have expanded to include peer coaching, collaborative work teams, study groups, action research teams, mentoring, and other activities linked to teacher leadership. While there is significant variety in the kind of activities educators may choose from for engaging in professional development, there are also common principles applied to professional development efforts that make them effective. For example, the National Staff Development Council (2015) suggests that the following principles are part of effective professional development:

1. Results Driven: School improvement goals are clear and professional learning is linked directly to expected results.
2. Standards-Based: Professional development is tied to student learning standards and standards for the professional growth of teachers and leaders.
3. Job Embedded: Professional development is anchored in the “real” work of teachers and school leaders.

Along with these principles and according to general consensus on the topic, effective professional development centers on clear results and emphasizes teacher and administrator learning. Activities are dependent on standards and integration with on-the-job work, rather than implemented as “extra” activity done outside of regular school hours or on staff development days.

Research by one of the authors of this article supports the claim that effective professional development is unified by common principles. According to Blackburn (2000), analysis of professional development programs, identified as exemplary by the U.S. Department of Education, showed several similarities. Staff development had a clear purpose linked to research, student data, and goals. Teachers were accountable for using newly acquired knowledge and skills in their classrooms to impact student achievement. Activities were relevant and hands-on. There was an emphasis on developing shared language for solving problems and overcoming issues. Decisions about current and future professional development activities were made with teacher input. Effective programs were led by supportive school leaders who fostered positive and collegial school environments.

Collaborative Professional Development Activities

Although effective programs are similar according to general principles,

the specific activities applied to assist teachers and administrators in adopting new knowledge and skills vary according to the specific context of each school. Nevertheless, there are some strategies frequently used by programs for organizing professional development activities. These strategies tend to be collaborative in comparison to many other approaches and they value results based on participation. Like most things, each strategy has its own advantages and disadvantages. Selecting among the strategies requires consideration of district goals and also matching strategies to available resources for thorough implementation. Five strategies based on collaboration, rather than independent effort, worth considering for any professional development program include book study, analysis of student work samples, learning walks, lesson study, and charrette.

Book Study

An effective way to engage educators in their own professional growth is to organize a book study. At some schools, every teacher is asked to read the same book and work in small groups to discuss the book and its implications for practice. At other schools, teachers may choose from several books and join colleagues who selected the same book for their discussion. The protocol below contains general guidelines for conducting a book study.

Book Study Protocol

- Membership should be voluntary, but inclusive.
- Decide a meeting schedule, meeting place, length of book to be read, and what will happen after the book is read. It is recommended that meetings last no more than one hour and be held at a consistent time and place.
- Select a responsible facilitator to keep the group on task and help manage meetings.
- Select a book with a clear objective in mind. For example, use *Rigor is not a Four Letter Word* with teachers to launch the conversation about rigor or use *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way* with school leaders or your school improvement team.
- Conversation is important in a book study. Members of the group share insights, ask questions about the text, and learn from others. It is important to talk about how the ideas can be applied directly in the classroom and how to overcome any potential obstacles.
- Journaling is a useful way for members to think about their reading and reflect on how they might apply new knowledge and skills in the classroom.

Analysis of Student Work Samples

A powerful way to improve the instructional program at any school is to analyze student work. In many schools, teams of teachers, either at the departmental, course, or grade level, examine student work as a way to clarify their own standards of achievement, to strengthen common expectations for students, or to align curriculum across faculty.

Because looking at student work significantly alters the norms of a school, it is most effective when the faculty is comfortable sharing samples from their own classrooms, especially when those samples reveal features of effective or ineffective practice. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform suggests several preliminary steps for organizing groups of educators to analyze student work:

Looking at Student Work Protocol

- Talk together about the process and how to ensure it is not evaluative.
- Identify ways to gather relevant contextual information (e.g., copy of assignments, along with scoring guides or rubrics).
- Select guidelines for the conversation to promote discussion and interaction (see www.lasw.org for several different approaches).
- Agree on how to select work samples.
- Establish a system for providing and receiving feedback that is constructive.

Learning Walks

A learning walk is a form of instructional walkthrough, but one that is typically organized and led by teachers. Similar to analyzing student work samples, learning walks are not evaluations of teacher practice. Likewise, they are not designed for individual feedback. Rather, learning walks are intended to help participants learn about instruction and identify areas of strength and weakness.

Learning walks provide a “snapshot” of the instructional program at a school. Since participants are in classrooms for short periods of time, they should avoid drawing conclusions about individual teachers or classes. An example of effective use of learning walks may be observed by one school in Los Angeles, which held learning walks each month. Groups of teachers conducted the walks looking for evidence of research-based instructional practices, specifically those described by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001). The following list suggests steps for initiating learning walks:

Learning Walks

1. Work with staff to identify the purpose of the learning walk.
2. Determine the process including length of classroom visits as well as what will occur during the visits. Develop and use consistent tools for participants to record observations and collect data.
3. Inform staff when the learning walks will occur.
4. Conduct a pre-walk orientation for those participating.

5. Conduct the learning walk and spend no more than 5 minutes in each classroom. Depending on the lesson, talk with the teacher and students, look at student work, and examine the organization of the classroom.
6. Immediately after the walk, ask participants to meet and talk about the information they gathered and how to share it with faculty. Participants may develop questions that they would ask to learn more about activities and events observed during the walk.
7. Develop a plan for sharing results to guide school improvement efforts.

Additional information about conducting learning walks is available at www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/walk

Lesson Study

Originally used by Japanese teachers, lesson study emphasizes working in small groups to plan, teach, observe, and critique a lesson. Lesson study involves groups of teachers in a collaborative process designed to systematically examine practice with the goal of becoming more effective.

Lesson Study Protocol

- Participants should be volunteers but the invitation to participate should be inclusive.
- Teachers collaborate to develop a detailed lesson plan.
- One member of the group teaches the lesson to students while other members observe.
- The group comes together to discuss observations about the lesson and student learning.
- The group works together to revise the lesson.
- Another teacher deploys the revised lesson while group members observe.
- The group reconvenes to discuss results.
- The revision process continues as long as necessary, until lesson objectives are achieved.
- Group members share insights about what they have learned from the process. The group may prepare a report to share with other colleagues.

Additional information about conducting a lesson study is available from Teachers College at Columbia University www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy. The site includes tools for conducting a lesson study and for lesson design www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/tools.html.

Charrette

A “charrette” is a set of agreed upon guidelines for talking with colleagues about a problem or issue. The conversation tends to be more trusting and more substantive because everyone knows the guidelines in advance. Charrettes are often used to improve work, while work is in progress, though guidelines are not useful as evaluative criteria. The following protocol describes steps for using Charrettes.

Charrette Protocol

1. A group, or individual, requests a charrette when they want others to help them overcome a problem or resolve an issue.
2. Another group is invited to look at the work and a facilitator is used to moderate the discussion.
3. The requesting group presents solutions they have tried, and a description of the desired outcome is clarified.

4. The group invited as observers discusses the issue while the requesting group listens and records notes. The emphasis is on improving the work, which now belongs to the entire group. A sense of “we’re in this together” characterizes discussion.
5. Once the requesting group is presented with potential solutions, it concludes the process and summarizes what was learned (Charrette Protocol adapted from Juarez, n.d.).

Concluding Thoughts

The most effective schools are those where faculty and staff believe in the power of professional development to improve student learning. When adults work together to learn, grow, and improve practice, it not only impacts student achievement, it positively impacts school culture and relationships between adults.

This article has presented five strategies for professional development that support positive outcomes, along with recognizing the power of teachers and leaders, working together, to improve schools.

References

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