

Professional Development in North Carolina

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In Search of High-Quality Professional Development

What is high-quality professional development? When an activity is rated positively by participants in terms of satisfaction with the experience (often called the "happiness quotient"), does that define high-quality? Most would agree that the standard must be much higher. Many educators are now advocating a direct link between the professional development experience and an observable impact in the classroom before the term "effective" can be applied. Little (1997) suggests that the "test of effective professional development is whether teachers and other educators come to know more about their subjects, their students, and their practice, and to make informed use of what they know." Ultimately the questions are, did change occur as a result of the professional development experience, did the change move staff toward an established goal related to student outcomes, and has change occurred within the organization to support the professional learning?

No Child Left Behind speaks clearly about professional development and the quality that must be expected. Specifically, NCLB says that effective professional development is a set of activities that produces a demonstrable and measurable effect on student achievement. ESEA emphasizes that effective professional development must be grounded in scientifically based research. Professional development also must be part of a systemic effort to improve and integrate quality at all stages – preparation, induction, support and ongoing development.

What does this mean for schools and school districts? Clearly it means that professional development as we have known it is extinct. Not only practice, but clearly thinking about professional learning must change.

What Have We Learned About Professional Development?

The research base on professional development has grown significantly in the past 20 years. In 1957, only about 50 studies on the topic were cited by the authors of the 56th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE). A current search of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database since 1978 produced more than 5,600 citations containing professional development as a subject heading.

In a 1989 meta-analysis of existing research and the relevant literature, Sparks and Loucks-Horsley described five effective models of staff development and identified the following characteristics of effective professional development practice:

- Activities are conducted in school settings and linked to other school wide improvement efforts
- Teachers are actively involved in planning, setting goals, and selecting activities

- Self-instruction is emphasized and a variety of "differentiated training opportunities" are offered
- Ongoing support and resources are provided
- Training is concrete and includes ongoing feedback, supervised trials, and assistance on request

Research into effective professional development consistently examines implementation of new teaching strategies and behaviors. Joyce and Showers (1996) note that "in the 1970s, evaluations of staff development that focused on teaching strategies and curriculum revealed that as few as 10 percent of the participants implemented what they had learned." Likely this was due in part to common professional development practices during that time – one-shot, after-school, workshops without appropriate follow up and organizational support.

In a 1987 synthesis of the research, Showers, Joyce, and Bennett examined the conditions necessary to change teachers' practice. They proposed a combination of theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback and found that sustained practice was a critical element. "For a complex model of teaching, we estimate that about 25 teaching episodes during which the new strategy is used are necessary before all the conditions of transfer are achieved" (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987). More recently, a report by the Southwest

Educational Development Laboratory notes, "It took 13-14 months to turn the teachers around" in a professional development effort that involved changing science teachers' instructional approach from one focused on science as definition, facts, and theories, to one that used an exploratory process to engage students in activities to develop understanding of science concepts (National Network of Eisenhower Regional Consortia and National Clearinghouse [NNERC], 1997).

Principles of High-Quality Professional Development

The critical role played by professional development in any attempt to attain the goals of educational reform has been recognized and advocated at the national level. President Bush and the nation's governors cited professional development for teachers as one of the original six education goals adopted in 1989 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 1994). Goal Four states that, "By the year 2000, the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continuous improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century."

To further delineate actions in support of this goal, the U.S. Department of Education's Professional Development Team identified 10 principles of high-quality professional development to serve as guidelines to both professional development providers and recipients. These principles reflect and embody what research identifies as best practice for professional development opportunities (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1997).

High-quality professional development:

1. Focuses on teachers as central to student learning, yet includes all other members of the school community
2. Focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement
3. Respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community
4. Reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership

5. Enables teachers to develop further experience in subject content, teaching strategies, uses of technologies, and other essential elements in teaching to high standards
6. Promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools
7. Is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate that development
8. Requires substantial time and other resources
9. Is driven by a coherent long-term plan
10. Is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning; and this assessment guides subsequent professional development efforts

The North Carolina Professional Development Standards guide the planning and implementation of high-quality professional development. Context Standards address the organization, system, and culture in which the new learning will be implemented. Process Standards refer to the "how" of professional development describing the learning processes used in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and addressing the use of data, evaluation, and research. Content Standards refer to the "what" of professional development and guide the planning of professional development that ensures quality teaching for all students.

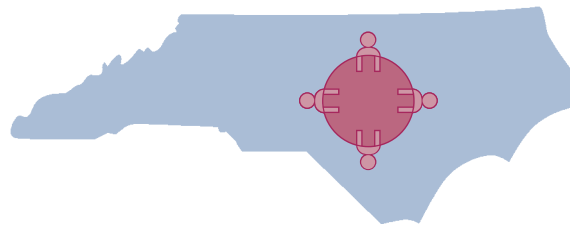
The Standards, when translated into daily practice, result in professional development that has been tailored to address specific needs of students and staff, that is intensive and includes follow-up, support, practice, and feedback, that is collaboratively planned by stakeholders, and that aligns fiscal and human resources – high-quality professional development.

Some Guiding Questions for Selecting Professional Development Activities

When considering a particular professional development activity, the following questions serve as a set of criteria for determining the potential effectiveness of the experience. While all professional development activities may not meet each of these criteria, the potential for success increases with each positive response.

Does the professional development activity:

- Reflect school and/or district priorities as outlined in the school or district improvement plan?
- Provide ongoing technical support during the implementation stage as well as opportunities for participants to practice with support and feedback?
- Have institutional support for implementation (time and resources)?
- Provide a means for determining the impact on student learning and performance?
- Include formative and summative evaluation?
- Encourage teachers to be active, investigative, reflective practitioners?
- Include content and practices that are grounded in scientifically based research?



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