

Professional Development in North Carolina

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Debbie Harris Rollins, Ed.D., *Coordinator of Professional Development* :: (919) 807-3356

Being Content with Content Decisions

Not all content is created equal. The North Carolina Professional Development Standards tell us that effective professional development focuses on content that has proven value in increasing student learning.

The content of effective professional learning experiences focuses on preparing educators to understand and appreciate all students and to create safe, orderly, supportive learning environments for them and to hold high expectations for their academic achievement. The content of effective professional learning also deepens educators' content knowledge and provides them with research-based instructional and assessment strategies and methodologies to design and implement appropriate instruction and assessment techniques for diverse learners. Additionally, the content of effective professional learning provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate effectively with families and other education stakeholders. In short, the focus should be content that makes a difference – a difference in classroom practices and ultimately in student outcomes.

This seems straightforward and simple, yet, we find the content of many professional development activities and events focused on things that have little, if anything, to do with preparing educators to meet the learning and behavior needs of students, deepening educators' content knowledge, or equipping educators with knowledge and skills to collaborate with stakeholders. Much professional development planning has become assessment of staff wants and wishes as opposed to needs. Professional development content should result from less "what people want to learn" and more of "what people need to learn."

PROCESS STANDARD: Data-Driven



Student Need as Basis of Content Selection

The process standards provide clear direction in selecting professional development content based on student needs. A critical first step in planning professional development is to decide what instructional personnel and school leaders need based on a careful analysis of student performance needs.

Planning should proceed in a backward fashion beginning with a review of the expectations for students. In North Carolina expectations are expressed by the State Board of Education (Strategic Priorities) and the State curriculum (Standard Course of Study). Professional development planners should next disaggregate student performance data. Multiple sets of formal and informal data should be disaggregated (analyzed by groups) and aggregated (reviewed for trends and patterns) to identify specific rather than broad areas of deficit.

The content focus of professional development should be that research-based program, practice, or methodology that has proven to be a successful or best practice with a similar student population and that equips school personnel with the skills, knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes to respond appropriately to the specific student needs identified during the analysis of the data. Too often, professional development content is chosen to respond to broad areas of deficit such as reading. Such planning misses the point. Without specific information - which students, what deficit, what specific areas of the discipline – appropriate professional development content cannot be selected and effective professional development planning cannot occur.

Using the Standards to Guide Content Selection: Steps and Guiding Questions

1. Analyze all available data to identify student needs. Multiple data sets (formal and informal) need to be disaggregated and aggregated.

QUESTIONS: What do the data suggest? What hypothesis can be generated based on analysis of the data?

2. Analyzed all available data to identify staff needs. Multiple data sets, again, need to be disaggregated and aggregated.

QUESTIONS: What do the data suggest? What hypothesis can be generated based on analysis of the data?

3. Identify any existing “gaps” between student needs and staff ability to meet those needs.

QUESTIONS: What do staff need to know and be able to do? What are teachers’ current competencies and strengths?

4. Specify acceptable evidence that would indicate that the gap had been appropriately addressed and any problems solved.

QUESTIONS: What evidence would stakeholders accept as verification that gaps had been closed? Will all stakeholders accept the same evidence?

5. Explore professional development content (research-based, successful, proven track record) that would equip staff with necessary knowledge, skills, and/or behaviors.

QUESTIONS: What research-based approaches exist? With what populations have these approaches been implemented?

6. Select content with the greatest potential for meeting identified needs and closing gaps.

QUESTIONS: Which research-based approaches best fit our context?

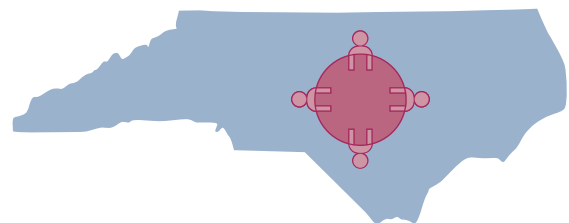
SUMMARY

High-quality professional development is critical for schools and districts to achieve their goals for student and staff performance. High-quality can only result when professional development content is meaningful and appropriately chosen to meet specific needs identified after careful analysis of multiple data sets. Failure to align professional development content with specific student and staff needs shortchanges both students and educators.⁴



REFERENCES

1. Killion, J. (1999). Selecting staff development content. Results (October)
2. Killion, J. (1999). Design staff development with student needs in mind. Results (April)
3. Ibid
4. Killion, op. cit



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North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Dr. Elsie C. Leak, Associate Superintendent, Office of Curriculum and School Reform Services
6307 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-6307 :: Telephone (919) 807-3761 :: Fax (919) 807-3767 :: Visit us on the Web: www.ncpublicschools.org