Planning and Conducting Professional Development That Makes a Difference
A Guide for School Leaders

The goal of professional development in schools is to accelerate student learning. It should focus on changing what is taught and how it is taught. An effective staff development program requires a great deal of time, effort and coordination in the areas of planning, implementation and follow-up. This guide contains a step-by-step approach that school leaders can use in improving the impact of professional development on teachers and students. Each step or activity is an important element of a successful program. By combining the elements, school leaders can support teachers as they improve their effectiveness and raise student achievement.

A Step-by-Step Approach to Professional Development

1. Identify needs.

Many professional development events are planned without input from the intended audience. In the case of a school, the audience is usually classroom teachers. Yet administrators often decide on their own what is “best” for their teachers and are puzzled when the results are less than satisfactory. If teachers are allowed to use their own experiences to “zero in” on critical content and instructional issues, they are apt to find what is needed to boost student achievement. If they are involved in decisions about professional development, they are much more likely to attend the sessions with enthusiasm and to implement what they learn.

Faculty involvement in professional development is most beneficial when it is guided by a real understanding of the gaps in student achievement. Unfortunately, teachers in most schools lack sufficient information about students’ grades, state and national test results and other indicators such as attendance rates and dropout rates. Before school leaders begin to discuss professional development, they need to give teachers more facts on student achievement. This may require a concerted effort to assemble student data into a powerful and revealing presentation. Giving teachers a close look at the school’s “health” should convince them that change is needed and should get them to think about the support they will need to do things differently.

School leaders can use various strategies to solicit input from teachers regarding their professional development needs. One quick and relatively easy approach is to get teachers to participate in a brainstorming session at a staff meeting. This works best if teachers know the discussion topic in advance and can think about their needs before the meeting. A brainstorming session allows teachers to hear what others think and to offer their own ideas. The school’s improvement plan can be used to spark discussion.
A second approach is to conduct a survey. This will require a core team (possibly the overall school-improvement team or a staff development focus team) to create a survey instrument that suggests topics in a number of areas. The school-improvement plan can be the source of ideas. It is important to keep in mind that narrowly focused staff development is more effective than staff development that tries to cover an array of topics in one jam-packed day. The latter approach simply frustrates teachers and impedes learning.

If a survey is conducted, every teacher should participate to make sure a consensus is reached. Teachers do not have to identify themselves on the survey, but they should provide demographic information such as the subjects they teach and the number of years they have taught. This information will enable those tabulating the results to look at the needs by subject area and by new vs. experienced teachers.

Regardless of the strategy, school leaders should get teachers’ input no later than January each year in order to plan professional development activities for the following school year. Teachers’ responses should be used to identify one or two priority topics for schoolwide emphasis. The responses can also be used to identify needs that can be addressed by conducting workshops for specific groups at the school or by sending groups to district, state and/or national conferences and workshops.

2. Develop a plan.

A school that lacks a professional development plan runs the risk of conducting haphazard events that do little to advance instructional skills or to raise student achievement. By considering teachers’ needs and the school’s overall improvement plan, school leaders can create a coordinated plan that will address school problems as a continuous process rather than a series of unrelated events.

An effective plan identifies the activities to be conducted, the target group for each activity (for example, mathematics teachers, interdisciplinary teams or all teachers) and a follow-up process. (See Steps 12 through 16.) The school will need a professional development team, led by the principal or another instructional leader, to handle this assignment. The team should include representatives from all academic disciplines and career/technical areas, counselors and other key faculty.

The plan should be as comprehensive as possible. It will need to include on-site events, district- and state-sponsored activities, workshops offered by High Schools That Work and other organizations, college and university courses, and Internet courses and activities. In other words, the plan should reflect every type of staff development opportunity available to teachers. It can also be the basis of teachers’ individual professional development plans.

School leaders can use the plan to determine how to spend professional development dollars. Some schools address the problem of “competing priorities” by selecting one priority as the focus for all or most of the staff development offered during the year. This approach enables schools to allocate time and money (often in limited supply) for the topic that has the greatest potential for raising student performance.
3. Make room in the school calendar for site-specific professional development.

Leaders will want to offer as many staff development events as possible at or near the school. The advantages include: 1) More teachers can participate since no travel costs are involved; and 2) Teachers will spend less time away from the classroom, reducing the need for substitute teachers.

Despite these advantages, school leaders often have trouble scheduling on-site staff development. The number of days designated for staff development is limited and may be filled with mandatory district-sponsored events or other activities unrelated to the school's professional development needs.

School leaders may want to set a goal to find at least five days per year that can be devoted to site-specific professional development. It would be even more desirable to move to a 190-day school year, which would allow 10 extra days for professional development. The extra time could be allocated half and half to activities for the entire faculty and activities for individuals or small groups.

Summer is a "prime time" for staff development, and some schools have found a way to fund a full week of activities during this period. Teachers are not distracted by classroom responsibilities during the summer and are much more receptive to new ideas and different ways of doing things as they prepare for a fresh start in the coming year. One warning: Some schools make the mistake of scheduling a professional development day just before the new school year begins, sometimes before teachers have had a chance to go into the classroom. This can create stress and resentment if teachers think they are being forced to attend staff development activities at a critical time in the school year.

District-sponsored staff development is a reality for every school. Principals can make these activities more valuable by sharing with district staff members the topics that teachers have identified as priorities.

Full-day workshops are highly desirable. They give teachers sufficient time to learn new strategies and plan how to use them in the classroom. If whole days are unavailable, some schools adopt a flexible schedule that frees time for staff development weekly, biweekly or monthly. On these days, students are dismissed early so that teachers can participate in staff development and plan their next steps. A series of short activities — each lasting about two hours — can be planned for several of these days. This enables teachers to try new methods in the classroom before returning for the next session to discuss what they have done and to seek answers to problems.

Weekend retreats and evening sessions are other options, but they have disadvantages. They encroach on teachers' personal time and may be hard to schedule in a calendar filled with school and community activities. Even though a school can squeeze in four hours of training in the afternoon and evening, teachers will be tired after a day in the classroom and may be less receptive to workshop content. An evening event that includes dinner may be acceptable.
Another approach is to hire substitutes so that teachers can attend workshops at the school or at other locations. This approach works best when the event targets one segment of the faculty — mathematics teachers, for example — or when teachers are being prepared to train others. In a train-the-trainer model, some teachers learn the new strategies with the understanding that they will train their colleagues. Because substitute teachers may be hard to find, some schools ask guidance counselors or business leaders to conduct a special program for students while teachers attend staff development events. Small schools may be able to use this option to free the entire faculty for staff development.

4. Start early to plan a professional development event.

Planning for a staff development activity should begin at least six months in advance. An early start is critical because 1) top-quality staff development providers are in great demand and may be “booked up” several months ahead, 2) advance planning gives a workshop leader time to customize his or her presentation to meet the school’s unique needs, and 3) school leaders need time to prepare teachers to get maximum benefit from a staff development event.

In planning a successful event, school leaders need to develop a clear goal and a set of objectives. This may be harder than it seems. A goal is a one-sentence statement of what the event is designed to accomplish. For example:

The goal of this workshop is to prepare school teams to plan and implement interdisciplinary projects.

This goal gives important information about the workshop. First, it says participants will be organized into teams. Second, it says the workshop will focus on preparing teachers to plan and implement interdisciplinary projects. Participants will expect to see examples of projects and learn how to plan projects of their own.

Objectives should address the measurable knowledge and skills that participants will gain during the workshop. For example, a set of objectives for the goal (stated above) might read as follows:

At the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- plan an interdisciplinary project;

- list ways to conduct a successful project; and

- work as a team to implement the project.

The workshop leader will be expected to help teachers meet these objectives. He or she will discuss the criteria for effective interdisciplinary instruction, provide guidelines for planning and implementing a project, and help the participants work in teams. Projects will need to meet each team member’s instructional objectives.
The date, time and location of a staff development activity are other factors that must be decided far in advance. If the event is to be held off-site, school leaders will want to begin early to reserve a facility large enough for the faculty. Such a facility may be unavailable at the last moment.

5. Find the best workshop leader.

Once the goal and objectives are developed and the date is set, it is time to start looking for the best person to lead the workshop. There are several sources of ideas. Members of the faculty may be able to suggest workshop leaders who do a good job. High Schools That Work maintains a database of workshop leaders who have received high ratings at HSTW-sponsored events. The HSTW professional development staff will be happy to identify workshop leaders. Another source of leaders is the annual High Schools That Work Staff Development Conference, where numerous presenters are featured each summer.

As the search begins, consider the characteristics of successful workshop leaders. The best leaders:

- are experts in the workshop topic;
- have authored books or articles on the topic and/or can produce written materials that school leaders can review in advance;
- are experienced in implementing the strategies that will be taught in the workshop;
- use a lively presentation style that motivates teachers;
- involve teachers in meaningful activities throughout the workshop;
- prepare simple, attractive visual materials using presentation software; and
- provide useful handouts that teachers can consult after the workshop to reinforce what they have learned.

The person responsible for contacting the workshop leader should talk with him or her in advance to address the goal and objectives the school team has written for the workshop. Find out how the workshop leader will support the goal and objectives, how the workshop will be organized, and what the participants will do.

Experienced professional development leaders can provide a list of references. It is a good idea to contact one or more of the references to learn about a leader’s presentation style and professional development services.

The fee that the workshop leader quotes may come as a shock. Daily rates may range from $400 to $2,000, depending on the leader’s experience, reputation and popularity. Keep in mind that the fee represents more than a one-day event; leaders usually need at least a day to prepare for the event and a day to travel to the school. If the fee is more than the school can afford, try to
negotiate a lower rate. Since the school will be expected to pay travel costs, make the workshop leader aware of any school or district regulations regarding travel reimbursement.

When you have decided on a workshop leader, prepare a written agreement that describes the services the school expects to receive. Leaders who make professional development a full-time business may have a standard contract that they can send. If not, a school leader can prepare a letter containing details such as the workshop topic, goal and objectives, date, time and location; exact services to be provided by the workshop leader; and the fee the leader will be paid. The workshop leader usually handles his or her own travel, but someone at the school may want to reserve a hotel room and provide local transportation.

6. Prepare teachers for the staff development event

Advance preparation of the participants is an aspect of professional development that often is overlooked. Teachers at too many events lack sufficient knowledge of the topic or the workshop agenda. This does not have to be the case. School leaders can take a number of actions to prepare teachers for a professional development activity. The first action is very simple: Post a calendar of events – containing the date, time, topic and workshop leader's name – in the faculty lounge, the school office and/or anywhere teachers are likely to see it.

Posting a notice is not enough, however. The next step is to use a regular faculty meeting to prepare for the upcoming event. This is a good opportunity to determine what faculty members know and do not know about the topic. One strategy is to ask faculty members to write questions that they hope will be answered during the workshop. The questions can be sent to the presenter in advance so that he or she will be prepared to meet teachers' expectations.

Another highly desirable but more complex pre-workshop activity is to ask teachers to read articles or books on the topic. Ask the workshop leader to suggest reference materials, and obtain copies at least three months in advance to give teachers time to read them. If the workshop is scheduled to take place during the school year, give teachers reading assignments for each month and plan to discuss the materials at faculty meetings. If the event will occur at the beginning of the school year, obtain the materials before the end of the previous year so that teachers can read them during the summer. As new teachers are hired, give them the appropriate materials.

If a professional development topic is based on an identified need and if teachers have an opportunity to discuss the topic in advance, most teachers will be ready to gain maximum benefit from the event.

7. Prepare the workshop leader.

One way to ensure that the goal and objectives will be met is to devote some time and energy to helping the workshop leader learn as much as possible about the school. This usually can be accomplished in an hour-long telephone call. Since most workshop leaders are extremely busy, you will want to schedule this call about a month before the workshop.
During the telephone conversation, give the workshop leader a brief overview of the school, a
detailed description of expectations for the workshop, and a report on activities that teachers have
undertaken related to the workshop topic. This is the time to share teachers’ questions and to
review the workshop hour by hour to reach agreement on the content. Tell the workshop leader to
make sure the participants develop a product that will help them implement what they learn.

Following this conversation, send the workshop leader a letter containing background informa-
tion on the school, a list of teachers’ questions and the agreed-upon workshop structure. This letter
will reinforce expectations and clear up any misunderstandings that might have occurred during the
telephone conversation.

8. Take care of ‘creature comforts.’

If teachers are uncomfortable, they cannot learn adequately. Make sure the meeting room is
neither too hot, too cold nor too crowded. Provide plenty of coffee and a good lunch. Attention to
detail will make the professional development experience pleasant for everyone.

In addressing the “creature comforts” of the participants, keep a few important guidelines in
mind. First, plan to arrive at least an hour ahead of time to make sure the room has been set up as
requested, the proper audiovisual equipment has been installed, and the coffee and other refresh-
ments are ready.

The best room setup is a configuration of round tables for six to eight persons each. Allow
plenty of space at the table for participants’ workbooks and other materials. Classroom-style is
another option, but this arrangement of rows of tables and chairs hinders teamwork – an important
component of many professional development events.

9. Use strategies to improve the effectiveness of the event.

Careful planning to this point will help an event run smoothly. However, there are several
actions that the professional development team can take to improve the event and set the stage for
follow-up activities. For example, the team will want to organize teachers into teams in advance
rather than waiting until the day of the event. Teachers have expressed frustration at being assigned
randomly. They prefer to serve on a team that will stay together after the workshop.

When teams are identified in advance, teachers can give input and can get accustomed to the
idea of working with others during the workshop and in the future. Each team should be balanced
rather than composed of all English teachers or all mathematics teachers. Cross-fertilization benefits
teachers by giving them access to a variety of ideas and perspectives. Another way to organize a
team is to group teachers who have common planning periods. This approach makes particular
sense in schools where teachers and students work in clusters or academies.

The workshop leader can help hold the audience’s attention by providing a break at least every
1½ hours. Breaks refresh participants and help them get ready for the next segment.
The following guidelines for effective staff development will be helpful:

- Set the stage during the first hour. The workshop leader should review the stated expectations and identify others as needed. The expectations can be checked periodically throughout the workshop and reviewed at the end.

- Use instructional strategies that work with adult learners. Like their students, teachers need to see a reason to learn. They benefit from a variety of activities, time to think and process information, question-and-answer sessions, and opportunities to contribute their own experiences. The workshop leader can alternate brief seven- to 10-minute presentations with periods of time for the whole group or small groups to brainstorm, write and share.

Every staff development event should include theory, demonstrations and time for participants to practice what they are learning.

10. Make sure the workshop leader uses strong audiovisuals and effective handouts.

No matter how dynamic a presenter may be, a workshop needs strong audiovisual materials and useful handout materials. In talking with the leader ahead of time, find out his or her audiovisual equipment needs. With today’s technology, it is possible to show interesting and colorful graphics that will hold participants’ attention longer than overhead transparencies did in the past. Each visual should contain no more than two or three bulleted points and should be written in large, easy-to-read type (at least 24 points in size). Do not use flip charts in rooms with more than 50 people. Instead, write on blank transparencies and project the words on a screen or a wall for everyone to see.

Teachers like to receive handouts that they can consult after the workshop. Packets of materials should contain:

- a program agenda;

- a workshop planner containing key information, strategies or tips for implementing new concepts, instructions for small-group activities, action-planning pages for use during the workshop and a list of resources (books, videos, Web pages and a list of schools where the workshop practices are being used successfully);

- take-home materials, including lesson plans, descriptions of classroom strategies and examples of student work that meets high standards; and

- classroom assessment instruments such as rubrics or guidelines that teachers can use to determine the impact of new practices on student learning.
11. Evaluate the event.

Plan to evaluate every professional development event. An evaluation form should include a scale allowing participants to rate various aspects of the workshop. It also should contain several open-ended questions giving participants an opportunity to express their views on what they liked and did not like about the workshop, what they will do as a result of the training, and the types of follow-up activities they would like to receive. Reserve a few minutes at the end of the workshop for participants to complete the evaluation form, and collect the forms before the participants leave. Plan to compile a report on the evaluations. (See a sample evaluation report form on page 10.)

The staff development focus team may want to use a computer program to compile a report on participants' individual evaluation forms. Be sure to record participants' comments along with the average ratings; sometimes the comments are more revealing than the scores. Ask the team to report the results at the next faculty meeting, and allow time for teachers to critique the event and to share their plans for implementing the new strategies. Discuss how to solve any problems that occurred at the workshop and make decisions about improving the next event.

12. Plan follow-up activities.

Professional development is effective only if something happens as a result. Too often, teachers are caught up in daily activities when they return to school and forget what they have learned. It is important for participants to have time to try new approaches. Research on professional development has shown that without follow-up activities, fewer than 10 percent of participants use new skills. School leaders can use the following strategies to make sure a staff development event is not just “a flash in the pan.”

- Require teachers to do something. For example, if the workshop theme was “interdisciplinary instruction,” ask each teacher to implement at least one interdisciplinary project during the next semester. This strategy will “make something happen” now and hopefully will motivate teachers to try new methods in the future without being required to do so. In using this approach, keep in mind that some teachers may resent being “required” to take action that they already intended to take.

- Use peer pressure. School leaders can emphasize the importance of a staff development event by featuring its concepts regularly in faculty meetings. Participating teachers can tell what they have attempted in the classroom and what they have learned from new methods. The enthusiasm of those who are trying new things can be contagious, and the recognition given those who are doing something innovative and effective can inspire others to improve. Faculty meetings also provide a forum for addressing problems that inevitably arise in implementing a new strategy.

As part of the follow-up process, school leaders will want to observe in classrooms, ask teachers about their progress, and develop assessment standards and instruments to measure the impact of new instructional techniques on student achievement.
Staff Development Evaluation Report
[Name of High School]
[Workshop Title, Workshop Leader’s Name and Date of the Event]

The ratings are based on the following scale: 4 = excellent; 3 = good; 2 = fair; 1 = poor.

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<th>Item</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
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<tr>
<td>Overall workshop evaluation</td>
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<td>Small-group activities</td>
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<td>Participant materials</td>
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<td>Audiovisual materials</td>
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<td>Leader’s presentation style</td>
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<td>Usefulness of content</td>
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<td>Responses to participants’ questions</td>
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Workshop Impact

The following scale is used to measure whether participants felt the workshop met the stated objectives:
3 = Accomplished; 2 = Accomplished somewhat/Need more information or practice; 1 = Did not accomplish

[List objectives here.]

Responses to specific questions: [Use an asterisk to indicate duplicate answers.]

- Which of your workshop expectations were unmet?
- How could this workshop be improved to better meet your needs?
- What changes will you make as a result of this workshop?
- What kind of follow-up will be most helpful to you?

Other comments:
All new approaches will not be successful, and teachers should not be “afraid to fail.” If school leaders consider failure as well as success as a learning opportunity, teachers are more willing to venture into new waters. This does not mean that success should go unrewarded. It simply means that teachers who fail should not be penalized but should receive extra help to make the next effort a success.

13. Arrange for follow-up training.

A professional development experience yields the best results when participants receive follow-up training. School leaders can arrange for the workshop leader to spend two days at the school several months after the workshop. On the first day, the workshop leader will observe teachers as they conduct lessons and involve students in activities based on the workshop content. During the second day, the leader will deliver additional training based on classroom observations and problems encountered by teachers in using new instructional methods. This type of follow-up will rejuvenate teachers, answer their questions and help them overcome obstacles that could cause them to abandon their efforts.

14. Establish peer support groups.

Another way to follow up is to establish peer support groups, each consisting of eight to 10 teachers interested in working together on a particular issue. The groups can meet during planning periods, before school or after school. Members can share their teaching experiences, discuss books and articles on a topic, and find solutions to problems. They can also observe in members’ classrooms in order to offer suggestions and learn new methods. The groups can report their experiences periodically at faculty meetings.

15. Reward success.

Some teachers adopt new strategies quickly and effectively and should be rewarded. One way to reward successful staff members is to give them public recognition for their accomplishments. This includes letting teachers share their experiences at faculty meetings and/or putting their projects and materials in a display case at the school. Another idea is to get local newspapers and radio and TV stations to do feature stories on teachers and their projects. It is also important to report outstanding accomplishments to the superintendent and the board of education.

16. Build the capacity of teachers to train others.

A comprehensive professional development program includes preparing “in-house experts.” Teachers who embrace a new approach and implement it quickly and successfully are logical candidates to train others. School leaders can build the capacity of teachers to serve as trainers by sending them to state or national events on the same topic. Some workshops are designed to prepare participants to be trainers.
The development of in-house experts has many advantages. With a trainer located in the school, teachers can get answers right away to many of the questions that arise in working with a new strategy. Also, the trainer can prepare new teachers who are hired during the year, saving the school the cost of bringing in an outside expert. Finally, trainers become better practitioners themselves after assisting their colleagues.

Summary

Professional development must be planned and presented carefully to make the greatest impact on teachers and students. It is not something that can be pulled together at the last minute or scattered randomly throughout the year. Effective staff development requires planning, effort, innovation, consistency and determination to help teachers improve what and how they teach. School leaders who take a serious approach to staff development will find that they can unleash the often-hidden potential of teachers to make a difference in students’ lives.