Professional Development: Why Do Schools Need It?

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EDUC 7742: Implementing Professional Development

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October 21, 2012
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Professional development has several benefits when implemented correctly. In order to see improvements in teaching and learning, schools have to design and implement effective professional development. For this paper, the author will begin by explaining the importance of professional development. Next, she will discuss the phases of professional development: design, evaluation, and implementation. Finally, she will address the need for considering content, process, and context when planning professional development.

**Importance of Professional Development**

Professional development is most effective when it is meaningful to participants. This means that when planning professional development one must look at the needs of both students and teachers. Many professional development sessions are not successful because the needs of teachers are not considered. If teachers are asked to attend professional development sessions which are not targeted to meet their needs, these sessions are seen as a waste of time. When choosing a focus for professional development programs, it is very important to gather and analyze data. This data will assist in creating goals for the evaluation of the professional development. Professional development sessions which are not guided by data will not allow for a true analysis of the success of the program. If goals are defined while the plan is being created, schools will know which data needs to be collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Professional development needs to engage participants. If teachers are not actively engaged, they will not focus on the information being shared. This is very similar to the way that teachers have to work to constantly engage students in the lesson. Another critical element of professional development is the monitoring and follow-up. After the new information has been shared with teachers, it is necessary to check on how well teachers are integrating this new
knowledge into the classroom. Without this monitoring, professional development programs are not consistently applied to classroom instruction.

**Design Phase**

The first step in designing professional development is choosing a model of change to guide the design. Killion and Roy (2009) describe the backmapping model with seven steps beginning with analyzing student needs and characteristics before creating a plan for implementing and evaluating professional development. When designing professional development, there are several design options including coaching, lesson study, classroom walk-throughs, and assessment as professional development (Easton, 2008). Easton (2008) describes coaching as a teacher working with a coach to improve specific aspects of teaching. Easton (2008) explains that lesson study is a process in which teachers work together in small groups or professional learning communities (PLCs) to plan, observe, and discuss lessons related to a specific area. During classroom walk-throughs teachers determine an area of need and then complete observations of one another to suggest ways to improve (Easton, 2008). When teachers work in a group and create assessments and rubrics they are using assessment as professional development (McTighe & Emberger, 2006).

**Evaluation Phase**

Once a professional development program has been designed, it is necessary to determine how the program will be evaluated. If results from an evaluation are not used to improve future professional development efforts, then the results are useless (Mizell, 2003). It is important to know who will use the results of an evaluation as well as how the results will be used by each group of stakeholders. Killion (2008) provides two sets of standards which can be used to guide evaluation of professional development, the American Evaluation Association and the Joint
Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. Using standards to decide on elements of the evaluation will help a group choose the types of data which need to be gathered. It is critical to evaluate professional development during the implementation phase in order to determine if the desired results are being achieved with the program and what changes need to be made to the program (Guskey, 2005).

**Implementation Phase**

During the implementation phase, it is important to share expectations with all stakeholders. Hall and Hord (2011) offer Innovation Configuration (IC) maps as one method for sharing expectations. IC maps provide descriptions of actions required by each group of stakeholders to increase the success of the professional development program. IC maps can also be used as a way of determining how well each teacher is meeting the expectations of administrators in regards to the new initiatives (Roy & Hord, 2004). It is also necessary to employ the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) during implementation. This model is meant to allow for individualized needs assessment and assistance. Effective use of the CBAM tools will increase the correct implementation of the new initiatives because each teacher is receiving support in his or her weak area rather than a generalized assistance.

**Content**

According to Dr. Stephanie Hirsh (Laureate, 2010) content is the first element of an organizing framework for effective professional development. Content refers to the information which will be shared with teachers during the professional development sessions. It is important to make sure that the content is meaningful because when the content cannot be applied to a teacher’s classroom, it is difficult to stay focused during the session. The most effective way to plan meaningful professional development is to look at the needs of both students and teachers.
Content for professional learning sessions can be provided in either large or small group sessions. The large group sessions can be used to present the majority of the content and small group sessions can look at ways to apply the content provided in large group meetings. When in small groups, some teachers may feel more comfortable asking questions.

**Process**

Dr. Stephanie Hirsh (Laureate, 2010) defines the second element of the organizing framework as the process, or the method which will be used to deliver the professional development. One process which can be used to share content with teachers in a professional learning setting is a coaching cycle. This cycle consists of a teaching session, followed by a model lesson, time for teachers to practice the strategies, and finally observations to determine which teachers have mastered the skill. The teaching session can be completed in a large group setting so that teachers can complete activities similar to what students will complete in the classrooms. Individual or small group coaching sessions or lesson study are other options for the method to use to deliver content to teachers. Lesson study is most effective when completed in a small group, such as a PLC.

**Context**

The final element of the organizing framework defined by Dr. Stephanie Hirsh (Laureate, 2010) is the context or the conditions at the school which affect the implementation of new strategies in the classroom. Several conditions must be addressed when looking at the context of professional learning. A few of these include time, location, and specific factors of the school. Professional development is most beneficial when it is embedded into the teachers’ regular workday (Easton, 2008). Professional learning should focus on analyzing data. One problem
with this is that teachers often do not have a location within the school where this can take place due to the fact that classrooms may be used all day.

At the school where this author works, there are several conditions which must be considered when planning professional development. The first aspect of context that affects professional development is the fact that almost a third of the students at this school are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). This means that teachers need strategies which are effective with ELLs. Also, asking for parental assistance is more difficult due to the fact that the majority of the parents do not speak English. The school involves parents through interpreters, but the interpreters are not always at the school which sometimes limits the involvement. Collaboration is another area of context which must be addressed in professional development. Many times, teachers think that simply discussing students in the hallway counts as collaboration. The administrators at this particular school have set up a system for consistent collaboration in regards to student data and lesson plans. The hope is that by increasing teacher collaboration, the school will see an increase in student achievement.

**Conclusion**

Professional development requires careful consideration of multiple aspects of a school. When a committee takes the time to truly understand each of these aspects, professional learning will be more directed at the needs of the teachers and will therefore have a greater impact on student learning. While the content, process, and context will be different at every school, these are the areas which need to be the focus of all plans for professional development.
References


