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ABSTRACT

Rural schools that reorganize themselves as genuine learning communities can develop and maintain a professional development process that benefits staff and students. Key components of a learning community are trust, respect, and collegiality. In schools that have become learning communities, teams of educators work collaboratively in structures that enable them to share responsibility for student learning. Teams may engage in study groups, action research, collective development of learning standards, or collective assessment of student work. In this way, the teacher's everyday work becomes a form of high-quality professional development. Excerpts from the literature emphasize the importance of professional development for increasing student achievement, promoting innovation and school improvement, and replenishing the minds and spirits of teachers. Planning for staff development should begin with the end in mind. Clarification of the purpose, vision, values, and goals of the school provides a framework for planning and implementing professional development. Staff development that aims to affect student learning requires familiarity with the standards or expectations for student learning and the careful disaggregation and analysis of student performance data. Research-based recommendations are listed for providing quality professional development for rural educators. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

Providing Professional Development for Rural Educators

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Introduction

From an outside view, rural education appears to have the ideal arrangement for meeting students' needs: the student/teacher ratio is small; bureaucratic procedures can be minimal (in comparison to urban schools); and getting to know the community and parents is manageable. However, from an inside view, rural education has a number of challenges: teachers have a number of individual preparations (five-seven); teachers teach to a large range of grade levels (grades 7-12); there may be only one teacher per discipline; and teachers are responsible for various duties and assignments in addition to their classroom teaching.

Having worked in rural schools for eighteen years—eleven as an English instructor and seven as a principal, I know first hand that rural educators have demanding schedules. Along with the opportunity to truly know each student comes the added challenge of meeting the unique needs of each student. Because rural educators know each student's strengths, weaknesses, interests, and dreams, the desire to provide learning opportunities that meet each student's needs is strong. Add to the challenging task of meeting each student's needs the number of changes that are occurring in education—standards, technology, safety, etc.—and the need for providing a high-quality, ongoing professional development program for rural educators becomes understandable.

The demands and challenges of education, however, need not take a toll on committed educators. By focusing on establishing a learning community, a school can provide high-quality, ongoing professional development. Schools that reorganize themselves as genuine learning communities and provide high-quality, ongoing

professional development opportunities will find that they are able to embrace the challenges with energy and a sense of renewal. Learning communities can provide the answers for meeting the needs of rural educators. Learning communities can provide the atmosphere, the tone, and the direction needed to develop and maintain a professional development process from which staff and students can benefit.

The purpose of this paper is to

- Share the research on (1) the relevance of learning communities, (2) the importance of professional development, and (3) the quality of professional development;
 - Describe how to provide high-quality, ongoing professional development; and
 - Share recommendations for establishing and maintaining high-quality, ongoing professional development.
-
- *Share the research on the relevance of learning communities*

Learning Communities

Peter Senge (1990) described learning communities as places “where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 5). According to Barth, “In a community of learners, adults and children learn simultaneously and in the same place to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them. In a community of learners, learning is endemic and mutually visible” (1990, p. 43).

Key components of a learning community include trust, respect, and collegiality.

Barth noted,

Good teaching arises out of knowledge of particular youngsters and the ideas and skills that captivate them. Such wisdom is likely to arise only in people who know that they have the authority to act on it.¹¹ Tell a teacher how to do everything and you deny that teacher the freedom to act on his or her wisdom. Able people—wise people—take jobs where they are entrusted with important tasks. Create a school without collegial trust and the authority to carry out improvements and you will create a third-rate school. Its faculty will be placeholders, not wise people. (1990, p.)

Build a school on honest relationships, and the inept, confused, or slothful teacher will be exposed, unable to hide in her or his classroom. Create a climate of trust, and insecure teachers will develop confidence with the help of their colleagues. Put bluntly, a collegial school drives out incompetents and succors the temporarily weak. Strong teachers elicit the best from students and guide them in serious learning. (1990, p. xii)

People work hard in a place where colleagues listen well and take one another seriously (while not necessarily always agreeing) and where there is an expectation—even a demand—that everyone on the faculty can and must make a difference in the overall life of the school. Collegiality arises from the trust within a group; and trust is a requisite when an institution of consequence—a school—depends on the honest expression of trust. (1990, p. xi)

Learning communities provide ways for everyone, regardless of role, to form teams of adults who work collaboratively in structures that enable them to share responsibility for student learning. In addition, strategies like study groups, peer coaching, action research teams, collective development of learning standards, and collective assessment of student work ensure that learning is a focused and ongoing process. In this way, the teacher's day-to-day work becomes a form of high quality professional development.

Educators involved in learning communities are committed to discovering and providing conditions that encourage and support learning. They work from the following assumptions:

- (1) Schools have the capacity to improve themselves, if the conditions are right. A major responsibility of those outside the schools is to help provide these conditions for those inside.
- (2) When the need and the purpose are there, when

the conditions are right, adults and students alike learn and each energizes and contributes to the learning of the other. (3) What needs to be improved about schools is their culture, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the nature and quality of learning experiences. (4) School improvement is an effort to determine and provide, from without and within, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among themselves. (Barth, 1990, p. 45)

According to Neuman and Simmons (2000),

If student achievement is to improve, the adults who work with students must learn and grow.... One effective way to create a common culture that values continuous learning for everyone is to create professional learning communities—small groups of practitioners who work together to foster reflective practice, collegiality, and collaboration and who develop and focus on a coherent set of standards-driven goals connected to teaching and learning. (p. 9).

The research on learning communities describes what is possible in a school focused on learning. Rural schools by structure and philosophy match the expectations and description of a learning community. Establishing a learning community in a rural school is a worthwhile effort that can result in a more coherent, focused atmosphere—an atmosphere that encourages committed educators to continue to grow through trust, respect and collegiality.

- *Share the research on the importance of professional development*

Importance of Professional Development

In order to have any type of success with school improvement efforts and improved student learning, high-quality, ongoing professional development must occur.

The following emphasizes the importance of professional development:

Too often teachers do what they did today because that is what they did yesterday or because that is what they think others expect them to do. Just as potters cannot teach others to craft in clay without setting their own hands to work at the wheel, so teachers cannot fully teach others the excitement, the difficulty, the patience,

and the satisfaction that accompany learning without themselves engaging in the messy frustrating, and rewarding 'clay' of learning. Inquiry for teachers can take place both in and out of the view of students, but to teacher and student alike there must be continuous evidence that it is occurring. For when teachers observe, examine, question, and reflect on their ideas and develop new practices that lead toward their ideals, students are alive. When teachers stop growing, so do their students. (Barth, 1990, p. 49-50)

"What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn," the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future declared in its well-documented 1996 report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. The importance of teachers' knowledge was underscored in a recent Tennessee study which found that elementary students who had the most effective teachers for three straight years averaged 54-60 points higher than those who had the least effective teachers. (Sparks, 1998, p. 2)

In its recent report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future argue that every child should have as an educational birthright the guarantee of a caring, competent, and qualified teacher, and that every teacher and principal should have the right to high-quality preparation and professional development. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 6)

My experience as a principal and with principals' centers suggest that a major antidote to the debilitating demands on the principalship and a major resource in building a community of learners is continuous personal and professional invigoration of principals... for those of high ability as well as low, those who meet with success as well as failure, and those who have been on the job for twenty years as well as two. (Barth, 1990, p. 67)

... staff development merits assessment, planning, ongoing support, and is directly tied to the district and schools' goals. Too often we make staff development decisions without carefully considering its purpose, intended outcomes, design, and support required to implement the learning. For so many educators, staff development is a "necessary evil," something to fill up inservice days, like a regular trip to the dentist. (Killion, 1999, p. 3)

Staff development is a powerful vehicle for implementing innovation. Change requires new skills, new knowledge, and often new attitudes and beliefs. To acquire these, people must have learning opportunities designed to prepare and support them as they engage in the change. (Killion, 1999, p. 3)

The only way we're going to get from where we are to where we want to be is through staff development. When you talk about school improvement, you're talking about people improvement. That's the only way to improve schools. (Boyer in DuFour, 1991, p. 3)

One of the best indicators of instructional leadership is the presence of an ongoing, school-based staff development program and a school climate in which that program can flourish. Teachers' perceptions support this research finding. Teachers who regard their principals as strong instructional leaders invariably point to the principal's active involvement in staff development activities as evidence of instructional leadership. Principals who wish to fulfill the role of instructional leaders must recognize their responsibilities in the development of the staffs they are attempting to lead. They must assume an active part in staff development if meaningful school improvement is to take place. (DuFour, 1991, p. 10)

Why is it so crucial that teachers and administrators become the leading learners in their schools? The first reason is the extraordinary power of modeling. "Do as I do, as well as I say" is a powerful message not lost on youngsters who want to emulate the most important adult role models in their lives. Second, the world is changing. The problem with schools isn't that they are no longer what they once were; the problem is that they are precisely what they once were. The world around the schoolhouse is changing dramatically. Teaching and leading are not innate for most of us. We teach and lead better when we constantly learn how to teach and lead.... Third, with learning comes replenishment of body, mind, and spirit—and of schools. These days, schools and the educators who reside in them are depleted. Replenishment comes from either leaving the exhausting work of the schoolhouse or from remaining there and coming alive as a learner. In order not to lose educators from the schools as dropouts, they must be restored as learners. (Barth, 2001, p. 28)

- *Share research on qualities of high-quality, ongoing professional development*

Description of Professional Development

Once an understanding of the importance and relevance of professional development is established, a description of the kind of professional development needed for a learning community needs to be clarified:

There is no one "right approach" to professional development that will produce excellence in teaching although useful approaches will match the culture and needs of specific school environments. However, in any successful professional development process, teachers will not simply receive knowledge but also generate new knowledge about students, learning, and teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 10).

At one time staff development was synonymous with “sit and get” sessions in which relatively passive participants were ‘made aware’ of the latest ideas regarding teaching and learning from so-called “experts.” Today... staff development not only includes high-quality ongoing training programs with intensive follow up and support, but also other growth-promoting processes such as study groups, action research, and peer coaching, to name a few. In addition, staff development is no longer viewed as something that is only necessary for teachers. We now recognize that everyone who affects student learning, from board of education, central office administrators, principals and teachers, to the classified/support staff and parents, must continually improve their knowledge and skills in order to ensure student learning. Likewise, we now understand that staff development is not the exclusive responsibility of someone given the title of “staff developer;” rather it is the responsibility of superintendents, central office administrators, principals, and teachers, among others. (Standards for Staff Development, 1995, p. 1)

Staff development in schools today should be less what “I want to learn” and more “what I need to learn” to improve the learning of all students. Such staff development planning begins with the end in mind. It focuses on what students are expected to know and be able to do and includes a thorough analysis of where students are in relationship to where we want them to be. (Killion, 1999, p. 3)

DuFour (1991) provided the following assumptions about the significance of staff development in a school improvement effort and the importance of the principal in determining the success of a staff development program: 1) The local school district and school provide the best area for school improvement efforts. 2) School improvement means people improvement. 3) The principal is a key figure in determining the ultimate success of any effort to develop school personnel and thus plays a major role in school improvement. 4) Schools seeking meaningful improvement must make a commitment to staff development programs that are purposeful and goal-directed.

- *Describe how to provide high-quality, ongoing professional development*

Planning Professional Development

Planning for staff development should begin with the end in mind. The following three questions should be answered: 1. How do we want our school/school district to be? 2. What data/evidence do we need to know we're there or not there? 3. What do we need to do to get there?

Those involved in the planning and implementation of staff development should also take the time to clarify the following with staff (DuFour):

- Purpose—Why do we exist?
- Vision—What do we hope to become?
- Values—How will we become the school we want to become?
- Goals—What steps? When?

By clarifying the purpose, vision, values, and goals of the school, a framework within which conversation, planning, and implementation about professional development can be established.

Killion (1999) offers the following suggestions for planning and implementing a staff development program that will affect student learning:

To plan staff development backwards, teams first become familiar with the standards or expectations for student learning. This means studying the curriculum, reviewing district, state, and/or national standards, and analyzing the scope and sequence.

With this baseline knowledge, staff development planners next must carefully and thoroughly disaggregate student performance data. This analysis requires examining multiple forms of student performance data rather than a single test. For example, schools should collect and analyze norm-referenced tests, state assessment tests, district and classroom performance assessments, student work, and other evidence.

Data analysts should answer several questions: What patterns emerge from the various data? What student performance deficits emerge across multiple sources? In what areas of the discipline are students strong and weak? For which students are these deficits and strengths most apparent? What is our best educated guess about what causes these results?

Such specific student information rarely emerges from an open-ended needs assessment. ...without carefully examining student performance data and comparing student needs to curriculum standards, schools will be in the dark about how to design staff development that will improve student performance. As a result, the impact of any staff development efforts will be insignificant. (p. 3)

- *Share recommendations for establishing and maintaining high-quality, ongoing professional development*

Recommendations for Professional Development

Based on the research, the following recommendations are suggested for providing quality professional development for rural educators:

- Create the time and the opportunity to develop and maintain a learning community.
- Begin with the end in mind and focus on student learning.
- Use school information and data to design a professional development program.
- Maintain ongoing professional development with intensive follow up and support.
- Use “growth-promoting” processes (i.e.—study groups, peer coaching, etc.)
- Provide the necessary leadership to establish and maintain a quality professional development program that supports a learning community.
- Respect and use staff members’ knowledge and skill.
- Provide staff with pertinent research and resources.
- Encourage membership in professional organizations and participation in local, state, and national conferences and conventions.
- Expect staff to grow professionally and to be accountable for student learning.

Other considerations about providing professional development include:

To make a difference in student learning, the researchers concluded, professional development must: 1) Help teachers understand the content they are teaching as well as the content of the standards and assessments that are being used; 2) Be linked to the work that students are expected to do; and 3) Be continuous. "When educational improvement is focused on teaching and learning academic content and when curriculum for improving teaching overlaps with curriculum and assessment for students, teaching practice and student performance are likely to improve." (Richardson, 1998, p. 1)

While good professional development should be anchored in the daily routine, another powerful form of learning for teachers and principals comes from membership in professional communities that extend beyond their classrooms and schools. Whether these communities are organized around subject matter, pedagogical issues, or particular reforms, they promote dialogue and support for risk-taking that is a part of any process of significant change.

These networks give teachers and principals opportunities to explore new ideas that originate beyond school community, and to discuss teaching and learning taking place within the profession at large. Such communities may include school/university collaborations, change efforts, teacher-to-teacher and school-to-school networks, partnerships with neighborhood-based organizations, and involvement in district, regional, or professional associations. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 10)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sparks, director of the National Staff Development Council emphasizes the importance of providing quality professional development:

Here is my view of a powerful stretching vision for schools: 1) All students and staff members learn and perform at high levels; 2) Every student has a competent, caring teacher; 3) Every teacher has the preparation, professional development, and other ongoing support to become competent; 4) A new form of results-driven, standards-based staff development is at the core of the reform movement. Here is my view of the current situation: 1) Many students don't learn at high levels; Whether students have competent, caring teachers is hit or miss; some kids have the good fortune to have such teachers, others do not; 3) Most staff development/school improvement activities don't focus on teachers' content knowledge, pedagogy, or other classroom-related knowledge and skills. Too often the focus is on 'safe' topics such as student self esteem or school climate. The small amount of staff development that focuses on teachers' instructional knowledge and skills often isn't sufficiently rigorous or sustained to produce

lasting on-the-job changes. While there are exceptions to the above, they're far too infrequent to ensure high levels of learning for all students. (1997, p. 2)

As educators, we must meet the challenges of educating today's students.

Professional development—when of high quality and ongoing—can provide educators with the skills and knowledge needed to meet the challenges. High-quality, ongoing professional development can guide, encourage, and reinvigorate rural educators—educators who often find themselves in an environment that demands much of them physically and emotionally. Professional development can ease those demands while also strengthening student learning.

Rural education has numerous strengths. Rural educators' knowledge, skill and commitment to teaching and learning should be respected and used. By establishing a genuine learning community and by providing high-quality, ongoing professional development, rural schools can continue to provide students with opportunities to learn and teachers with opportunities to grow.

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