



Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) Policy Brief



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Community Colleges as Professional Development: Resources for Working Teachers

Introduction

Education policy must respond to the changing needs of students and their teachers, just as businesses provide employee training as market and industry changes evolve. Like all professionals, even the best-trained teachers need to keep up with the changes in their subject field and developments in current practices and policies.

“School improvement efforts over the last few decades require teachers not only to study, implement and assess learner outcomes outlined in local, state and national educational standards but also to provide meaningful, engaged learning (cognitively, socially and culturally) for a very diverse student population. Teachers are expected to understand emerging standards – such as those in math and science – and views of learning, and to change their roles and practice accordingly. Teachers who were prepared for their profession prior to the reform movement may not be prepared for these new practices and roles.”

There is growing consensus among education reformers that professional development is at the center of education reform and instructional improvement. In working toward change, teachers need to be continually supported with professional development to address the additional challenges of implementing educational standards, working with diverse populations and changing forms of student assessment.

In general, professional development programs help teachers improve their skills, keep up with changes in statewide student performance standards and incorporate them into their teaching, and enhance student learning. They also help teachers learn new teaching methods and adapt to changing school environments. Professional development programs that help teachers in the instructional use of computers, the Internet and other technologies are often offered by community colleges.

In most school districts, professional development is thought about almost exclusively in terms of formal education activities such as courses or workshops. Two or three times a year, school administrators designate a half or full day for an “inservice” program. Typically, professional development is relegated to after-school sessions or some other out-of-school time, separating it from the workday and from the workplace.

These programs may feature experts who speak to teachers on a specific topic or may take the form of a series of workshops that teachers can choose to attend. Teachers typically spend a few hours listening and acquiring practical tips and some useful materials. There is seldom any follow-up to the experience.

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PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

- Teachers participate in professional development for a number of reasons, including:
- Salary increases
- Certificate maintenance
- Career mobility
- Gaining new skills and knowledge to enhance classroom performance.

Teacher professional development is often required as part of a school improvement plan. Recertification policies in most states require that teachers earn a certain number of credits or continuing education units (CEUs) within a set time (typically five years). Some states expect teachers to obtain a master's degree within a given period to obtain a permanent license or reach the highest step in a career ladder. Some districts subsidize the tuition for graduate courses taken by teachers.

Sometimes teachers receive compensation for professional development on an individual basis for the number of hours spent above and beyond the nine-month teacher contract. Salary scales in many districts offer increments to teachers for taking additional coursework or CEUs.

The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001 (or No Child Left Behind Act) emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional development and offers states substantial funding. The law also combines the funding of federal education programs, including class-size reduction and the Eisenhower Professional Development program, into performance-based grants. States and local districts are to use this funding to strengthen the skills and improve the knowledge of their public school teachers, principals and administrators. The plan also establishes math and science partnerships between state and local districts and institutions of higher education. The ESEA offers opportunities for community colleges to develop partnerships with and offer their expertise to local schools and districts.

"We know a good deal about the characteristics of successful professional development. It focuses on concrete classroom applications of general ideas; it exposes teachers to actual practice rather than to description of practice; it involves opportunities for observation, critique and reflection; it involves opportunities for group support and collaboration; and it involves deliberate evaluation and feedback by skills practitioners with expertise about good teaching. But while we know a good deal about the characteristics of good professional development, we know a good deal less about how to organize successful professional development so as to influence practice in large numbers of schools and classrooms." In this report, the author explores how community colleges can be used as resources.



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

Current Roles of Community Colleges in Professional Development

Community colleges already play a role in teacher professional development by offering courses, workshops and institutes that enhance teacher competency in math, science, technology and foreign languages. It appears most current offerings revolve around the use of technology and how to integrate it into curricula. Mathematics professional development also is common and usually includes a technology component. Below are some examples of current community college offerings.

Three community college districts – **Maricopa (Arizona)**, **Miami-Dade (Florida)**, and **Cuyahoga (Ohio)** – are currently involved in The Alliance for Training K-12 Teachers in Instructional Technologies. The project for K-12 teachers to be trained in technology is a three-year initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and is a partnership between the Stevens Institute of Technology, the League for Innovation in the Community College, 13-WNET and the three community colleges. The collaboration creates trainers proficient in the use and integration of information technology, who then serve as staff developers in their schools and districts.

The Alliance project includes a comprehensive training package in which the Internet is used as a resource to teach curriculum development in math to middle school teachers. Teachers learn how to use the Internet, chat rooms and other types of information technology. It provides training and support for teams of three faculty members and administrators from each of the three community colleges, who in turn provide training and support to teams of trainers from partner school systems. Project partners and community colleges provide ongoing support to schools. The curriculum emphasis is on science, but the project is applicable for all grade levels and many subject areas.

At **Kankakee Community College** in Illinois, a No Child Left Behind grant supports the Mathematics and Science Enrichment Project. It is a professional development program that consists of a one-week math technology workshop. The collaboration between the community college and Aurora University allows teachers to receive continuing professional development units and/or post-graduate credit. Kankakee Community College also is approved by the Illinois State Board of Education to provide other professional development training for teachers. Some examples of classes offered are:

- Learning Disabilities and Oppositional Disorders in School-age Children
- Classroom Management for Diverse Populations
- Spanish for School Administrators, Teachers and Staff
- Spanish for Child Care Facilities.

In Maryland, **Essex Community College** offers an inservice training program where middle school teachers learn ways to use graphing calculators, algebra software and the



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

Internet for teaching math. **Anne Arundel Community College** has a summer Technology Institute and works with local schools to provide technology integration to teachers and staff.

Delaware Technical and Community College has an Educational Technology Certificate (ETC) program that helps teachers integrate technology into their curriculum and use computers as teaching tools. Developed by a statewide advisory committee of college faculty and school district representatives, the program has been identified as a national model by the American Association of Community Colleges, and helped the College earn the 1999 Community College of the Year Award from the National Alliance of Business.

Northern Essex Community College in Massachusetts has a technology program to give teachers tools to engage recent immigrants outside the traditional school schedule.

Tulsa Community College in Oklahoma has a professional development center where teachers train in the use of technology to enhance student learning.

In Virginia, **J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College** collaborates with Virginia Commonwealth University, other two- and four-year colleges, and local school districts. Courses and institutes have been developed to model best practices in teaching, assessment techniques and the use of technology. Eisenhower institutes are available to train inservice teachers on graphing calculator-enhanced teaching and geometry, and to create a team-taught statistical course.

Challenges to Community Colleges in the Professional Development Market

Although there are examples of state-level initiatives on professional development, challenges exist regarding the delivery of programs, the payoff to teachers, and the quality of community college programs and faculty.

Delivery

There are inherent problems in the way professional development is usually delivered. The following are typical criticisms of professional development efforts:

- Inflexible and too short – Instructors have a predetermined amount of material to get through in a short amount of time
- Often designed as “one size fits all,” operating as if all participants have the same background, the same subject areas, and learn at the same pace and in the same way
- Inconvenient, involving travel to areas sometimes a distance from home or school – It takes place outside the classroom environment and requires additional time beyond the normal daily schedule
- Teachers are not involved in determining program content.



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

Credits Earned Toward Salary Advancement

State and local policies often emphasize graduate credits as the only ones that count toward salary advancement and promotion. This policy deters teachers from taking advantage of professional development opportunities at community colleges. This may work against effective professional development programs offered by community colleges.

Quality of Community College Programs and Faculty

There are some who question whether community colleges are the appropriate place to offer professional development. Programs are suspected of lacking content expertise in specific subjects. There are also questions regarding the faculty's quality and educational background.

Policy Recommendations

State policymakers should reach out to key stakeholders such as local board members, school administrators, teacher leaders, and community college and university representatives and engage them in discussions about the adequacy of existing professional development opportunities. Without proper planning and development, professional development programs are likely to be fragmented, resulting in the failure of attempts to improve teaching. A coherent plan for systemic change that includes community colleges as valuable resources will be most effective. The following recommendations are offered:

- **Make clear the advantages of community college.**
 - ▶ They have leaders in using technology in the classroom.
 - ▶ They can develop and provide high-quality continuing education programs for teachers either on their own or with universities.
 - ▶ They are located near working teachers, so they can provide ongoing program support and continuity that may not be possible for more distant institutions.
 - ▶ Community colleges have fewer barriers to using superior classroom teachers as faculty than do four-year institutions. Community colleges can readily draw local teaching talent to conduct professional development.
- **Establish community college program criteria and faculty requirements.** Community colleges must provide evidence they have quality professional development programs and qualified faculty. The community college can work with the appropriate state and local boards and institutions to establish standards.
- **Ensure broad access to providers of high-quality professional development.** This is an important state responsibility. The community-based locations of community colleges can serve districts that may not have access to professional development programs otherwise, especially hard-to-serve schools and isolated rural districts.
- **Establish clearinghouse of programs.** States should increase awareness by establishing a clearinghouse of promising professional development programs and strategies, easily accessible to principals and teachers, and include models developed by other



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

school/district/community college collaborations. This would ensure effective professional development opportunities are accessible to teachers who serve the most vulnerable students. Teachers who work with poor children, isolated minorities, immigrant families and others who are at high risk of failure in the schools often work under the most difficult conditions and have less time and opportunity for professional development.

- **Reduce school or district costs.** The use of community college services and facilities could reduce the costs to the local school or district. Local districts bear the brunt of professional development costs, which are much higher than is typically understood by state and local policymakers. Expenditures include the staff costs associated with planning and delivering inservice programs, and opening schools for two to five extra days per year for inservice.
- **Community college credits toward salary increases.** Systemic reform should allow community college credits to count toward salary increases and promotion when the community college offerings are provided through collaborations with university programs. In many states, teachers need graduate credit to qualify for higher pay. This policy deters teachers from participating in community college professional development programs.
- **Change method of delivery.** Delivery methods for professional development should be:
 - ▶ Economical
 - ▶ Flexible
 - ▶ Convenient
 - ▶ Adaptable to individual differences
 - ▶ Responsive to the complexities of classroom teaching.

Community college programs can meet these standards because they can offer programs at low costs. Because they are close by, training can take place in local schools or be supported through distance education, allowing teachers to work at their own pace.

Regardless of who provide professional development, challenges to the planning and funding of programs need to be considered. The following recommendations address these issues:

- **Develop longer inservice programs.** For successful, long-lasting results, a new approach to professional development should feature longer inservice programs. Because learning that takes place in communities is more effective than learning in isolation, learning should be integrated with classroom practice. In addition, teachers should be included in defining the content, rather than having it imposed on them.
- **Assign time for training activities.** The National Staff Development Council recommends that 20% of the teacher work year be devoted to professional development. This is in contrast to the norm of several days a year or a few hours per week for staff development. The typical one-time professional development seminar has limited value.



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

More time devoted to professional development is vital to building a culture of professional growth among teachers and acculturating them into an environment that values continual learning.

- **Integrate professional development into classroom.** Because effective professional development is embedded in the workplace, state policy should enable schools and districts to incorporate professional development into teachers' routine work. To be effective, professional development must be related closely to teachers' work experience.
- **Provide local support.** The schools and districts need flexibility and support for integrating programs into the school and classroom schedule.
- **Fund professional development.** External factors such as changes in the state's funding formula, property tax values, demographic growth and local politics influence funding. States must make sure all local schools have access to the funds necessary to provide inservice training and not to reduce funds from budgets during financially difficult times.

Conclusion

Education reform initiatives include suggestions for new professional development strategies because current offerings are deemed ineffective at improving teacher competency and enhancing student learning. Most often, professional development takes place outside the school and classroom environment, is too short and involves no follow-up.

Community colleges can meet the needs of new professional development strategies by addressing the inflexibility and inconvenience of other programs. The local nature of community colleges can better serve schools with limited access to opportunities offered in other venues. Furthermore, costs to local schools and districts can be reduced by using community college facilities for the development and delivery of professional development programs.

With their valuable resources in technology, off-site and distance education, community colleges can collaborate with universities and local schools in programs that embed professional development into daily educational processes and the classroom environment. Teachers need consistent on-the-job professional development, and community colleges are in a good position to provide that continuity.

Community colleges should first prove their competency and unique capabilities through formal procedures, rather than be given an open door to offering professional development services. With appropriate standards and approval processes in place, community colleges should be allowed to provide resources, especially in rural and hard-to-serve areas. Furthermore, universities should willingly collaborate on these programs. State policy can encourage strategic change in professional development by supporting community colleges as key resources.



PT3 Policy Brief

Resources for Working Teachers (cont'd)

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