



Preliminary Study of Professional Development Improvement Efforts

by

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Reformers argue that for schools to educate all children to higher standards, teachers need a deeper understanding of the content they teach, of specific areas of content that challenge students, and of effective strategies for meeting those challenges. As a result, more and more reform programs include intensive, continuing professional development that addresses these needs. Past professional development opportunities offered by school districts, higher education institutions, and other sources have been criticized as ineffective. Critics argue that the predominance of short, discrete events with limited connection to what teachers do in the classroom and little follow-up or guidance for teachers have done little good. The sessions are rarely coordinated, so professional development becomes a patchwork with little coherence or cumulative impact. The situation may be most desperate in urban districts with a strong need for improvement, intense external pressure, and limited resources.

New Jersey provides an example of a state that has adopted policies that might encourage urban schools and districts to provide more coherent professional development. For almost 30 years, the state has been locked in litigation (*Abbott v. Burke*) through which urban school districts hope to get funding equal to that of the state's wealthiest districts as a step towards equalizing educational opportunity. A series of recent decisions

has created a situation fraught with confusion but with the potential to help urban schools increase the amount of professional development offered and focus that professional development on giving teachers the knowledge required to improve student achievement. These decisions mandate the adoption of a set of core curriculum content standards that define what children should know in seven content areas in grades 4, 8, and 11; increased funding to the 30 urban districts named in the litigation; adoption of a "whole-school reform (WSR) program" approved by the state; and site-based management and budgeting in each district aimed at giving schools more control over internal functions, including professional development.

For the past year, the Center for Education Policy Analysis at Rutgers University has been studying professional development for the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University. The purpose of the study is to determine if New Jersey's program of reforms will lead to more focused professional development and more effective school improvement in the state's urban districts. The study includes one high school, one middle school, and two elementary schools in each of three urban districts in the state. While it is too early to determine the effects of new state policy on professional development, preliminary data suggest a number of factors that work for and against

improvement efforts. These include state and federal budget policies, state standards and assessments, the WSR programs, state professional development policies, and district and school leadership.

State and Federal Budget Policies

The state developed budgets for each of the WSR models to increase uniformity in the budget-writing process, making it easier to analyze expenditures in various categories, including professional development. These models allow many schools to obtain more money than they could in the past and to focus a good deal of that on professional development. Over time, these new budgetary systems should help districts and schools in evaluating their professional development programs.

State Standards and Assessments

High-profile statewide testing has led districts to focus on teaching to the tested standards. New Jersey plans to test students in all curriculum content areas but currently administers tests in reading, writing, and mathematics, and to a lesser degree in science and social studies. The focus on language arts and mathematics reflects the state's concern that students have scored lower in these areas than in science. Not surprisingly, school and district leaders express a similar focus when developing their professional development programs.

Whole-School Reform Programs

Whole-school reform models include specific programs for professional development. Those programs, with a strong emphasis on curriculum, help schools focus their professional development efforts on increasing teacher knowledge of content and pedagogy. Furthermore, WSR models offer a detailed curriculum in a few content areas. While there is evidence that content-focused professional development can improve student achievement, it remains relatively limited (Cohen & Hill, 1998). WSR models that emphasize content and uniform state standards may not provide professional development relevant to the particular needs of students. One New Jersey district with a large population of low-achieving, non-native English-speaking students pays for its teachers to get certified as English-as-a-second-language and/or special education teachers. In this case, the content focus failed to meet the needs of the students.

Other aspects of WSR programs can work against content-focused professional development. Models that emphasize parental and community support offer fewer strategies for professional development related to instruction. Several principals we interviewed who had such WSR programs supplemented them with outside sources of content-focused professional development.

Another problem relates to the district's choice to adopt multiple models or a uniform model across schools. The adoption of multiple models challenges the district to support schools moving forward in very different ways. In districts with multiple WSR models, opportunities for district-wide professional development, as well as cross-school articulation, decrease. Districts where most schools use the same WSR model can focus their efforts, but there is a risk that those efforts may promote a model that does not improve teaching and learning.

Finally, New Jersey's mandate for massive WSR implementation and the subsequent widespread adoption of

programs seems to have spread some models too thin or pushed them to capacity. Some models simply do not have a strong enough program to offer sufficient assistance, which may result in poor implementation of the program.

State Professional Development Policies

New Jersey's recent requirement that each new teacher receive two years of mentoring serves as a mandate for professional development. Schools can simply comply or use this as an opportunity to develop quality professional development for both the new teachers and their mentors. One district took advantage of resources from a local college to create its mentoring program. Another developed training manuals for both mentor and mentee to supplement the development sessions.

Another new state policy requires all teachers to participate in 100 hours of professional development over five years. To help teachers and their supervisors determine which activities to participate in, the state has developed a framework for "What Counts" as part of the requirement. This framework demands that schools align professional development with district and state needs. The new requirements also compel schools and districts to develop a methodology for tracking professional development hours. Schools without a clear methodology are distracted by the mechanics of recordkeeping.

District and School Leadership

Superintendents with a clear vision of where to guide the district facilitate the development of focused professional development programs. In one district, the superintendent viewed literacy as foundational and encouraged the schools in his district to adopt WSR models with a strong literacy focus. As schools began to show progress with literacy, he gradually allowed schools to turn attention to mathematics. The superintendent's vision helps coordinate and focus professional development.

Site-based management in each of the

30 Abbott districts has given schools more influence over their budgets. However, it also hinders district recordkeeping and administrative oversight and support services, including the ability to track professional development activities.

Within schools, the success of the WSR model and its professional development program requires the involvement and support of principals. Principals who make a special effort to encourage the work of the WSR facilitators and the faculty will likely get better results. One principal supported the staff's professional development needs and the efforts of the WSR facilitator by providing a space furnished with the materials and tools necessary to maximize development efforts. This support facilitates the development of focused professional development activity.

Conclusions

Our early research suggests a shift in the organization of professional development from discrete and poorly guided activities to more coherent professional development shaped by new state policies governing standards, assessments, and WSR models. These changes show promise for focusing content and raising student achievement. Additional benefits can be found when supportive superintendents and principals have a clear vision for reform aligned with state standards. The barriers to developing a coherent approach to professional development include the diverse needs of students and teachers, weak WSR models, decreased district support services, and undeveloped recording systems for tracking professional development. The Center for Education Policy Analysis/Laboratory for Student Success study will continue through the 2001-2002 school year.

References

- Cohen, D. K., & Hill, H. C. (1998). Instructional policy and classroom performance: The mathematics reform in California. *Teachers College Record, 102*(2), 294-343.