

The Professional Development Problem

While debate about professional development expands, educator hopes for feeling supported are shrinking. We can be hopeful that the connection between teacher training and student learning seems to be realized and now what's needed is to find the right formula for improving this crucial component of school culture. In our struggle, thus far to identify answers, we have created new names for PD, different ways to measure efficacy, and even innovated delivery methods, all of which have created greater fragmentation.

Recent studies, including the Gates Foundation, the TNTP Project and Harvard research, all report failing grades from administrators and teachers alike, which is one certainty we can begin with. Only 40 percent of teachers' value PD activities (TNTP) and few teachers (34 percent) think professional development has improved (Gates Foundation). We also know that nearly half of all new teachers won't make it past five years. If we overlay this data with a recent Gallup Poll of one million students, half of which reported feeling disengaged at school, we connect the dots to the loss of autonomy and input as a consequence of our push for accountability.

If we can't effectively support our educators then expecting them to reverse the concerning trends of high school dropouts (more than ¼ fail to graduate H.S.), college readiness (less than 22% considered ready, lower for minorities) and educational achievement (ranked 27th globally below Cuba and Mexico), is unrealistic. Parallel statistics on teacher job satisfaction, down nearly 25%, daily stress, up around 50%, and the majority of learning coming from colleagues on the job (Harvard Report), tells us the 68 hours/year and 18k/teacher for PD is lacking.

Whether we call it job embedded coaching, professional learning, or mentoring; we need better integration with the shared mission/ vision of the school. The delivery method including video platforms, in-services, self-determined learning, and PD Communities require ongoing validation to ensure a greater return on investment (ROI). And the way we measure efficacy including standardized testing results, self-reports and competency based learning needs to be considered with student and teacher engagement as a primary determinant of success.

With research from the U.S. Dept. of Education (Stats in Brief, 2015) showing perception of autonomy for teachers in the low range (especially in low income schools), volition is another component of this debate. The growing awareness of a heutagogical model (self-determined learning) seems relevant if we can ensure synergy with organizational needs. Appreciating that volition, engagement, and teaching excellent are all tied together, creating essential guidelines for every school's planning for PD.

Balancing the needs of both individual with regard to autonomy and the organization's obligation to meet district, state, and federal expectations, requires our initial recognition that these needs are separate but related. As a guide to help schools construct the most efficient and constructive process for personal growth and professional development, we want to include training four dimensions:

1. Professional Engagement (awareness and processes)
2. Professional Learning (skills, knowledge, theory)
3. Organizational Mandates (required trainings)
4. Behavioral Health (wellness)

Professional Engagement includes classroom management, dealing with challenging students, interacting with families, and understanding oneself in relation to all these groups. Engagement includes working relationships with colleagues and administrators as well as the import for keeping students invested in their education. Student investment is crucial, noted by Gallup who just released a poll showing that only about half of our student's report feeling engaged, with a fifth being actively disengaged. Without a change in engagement, professional development efforts will be severely hampered and learning outcomes will stay depressed. For administrators, this area would target school culture and how to improve the health of the organization through adaptation, climate, and infrastructure.

Professional Learning is moving toward a competency based approach. Due to the push for outcome based measures and accountability, the intent is to increase the area from student learning to teacher learning. This move is a response to the research which sites a growing diversification of training models without a corresponding gain in efficacy as measured by educators. The training in this area is mostly academically focused, such as common core standards and STEM. This area may be stipulated by the district or via the educator but historically has lacked synergy with the integration of institution and individual goals.

Organizational Mandates are those trainings educators need to take each year to fill basic requirements, such as Bloodborne Pathogens, Bullying, and Asthma. There are many of these types of training but they vary by district and state. These trainings are often done through local partnerships with law enforcement, in house by nurses and guidance counselors, or through PD organizations that specialize in these areas. These topics are some of the most unpleasant for educators, typically being done in ways that impart little sustainable learning and certainly no investment by the educator. Putting effort into making this category fun and interesting will go a long way toward building a climate of cohesion.

Behavioral Health is the least known aspect of PD, more familiar to for-profit organizations as opposed to non-profits. The business world has recognized that healthy employees correlate with greater productivity and efficiency, thus wellness training is offered to bridge the gap between individual and organizational needs. Schools are beginning to catch on this this need as well, introducing yoga and nutrition into their organizational resources. Simply put, the healthier our educators are emotionally and physically, the greater their output of energy with students.

A blending of all four dimensions is needed to have a well-balanced professional development/ learning community. If any one of these areas isn't being addressed, there will be consequences such as ambivalence, resentment, disengagement, and even undermining of the system which in turn can impact the school culture and overall health of the school as an organization.

Through recent research on school culture (NYU Research Alliance) verifies what we already knew, which is improved school culture correlates highly with student achievement. Thus, we form a loop between student engagement, professional development, and school culture, at the heart of an even more complex tapestry that forms the basis of our professional development solution.

Author

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