3 — Continuous Professional Development

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE A PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL
RESPONSIBILITY AS WELL AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY. IN
OTHER WORDS, EACH TEACHER HAS A PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY
TO CONTINUE TO BECOME MORE EXPERT WITH EVERY YEAR OF
TEACHING. EACH DISTRICT HAS AN ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY
TO SUPPORT THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EACH MEMBER OF
THE FACULTY.

—Richard Allington, **What Really Matters for Struggling Readers:**
Designing Research-Based Programs

World renowned for extraordinary leadership in the medical profession, the Cleveland Clinic builds into its organizational culture many staff opportunities for continuing education and professional development. Weekly inservices demonstrate new techniques, procedures, or technology. Regularly scheduled release time for research updates and specialized training sustains professional growth for a highly skilled and knowledgeable staff. Patient outcomes are carefully charted, and collaborative teams determine a course of treatment. Systems of instructive support are designed so that professionals are constantly learning, monitoring, and evaluating high standards of practice while either mentoring or being mentored in distinct focus areas. Professional development is woven into the everyday fabric of the medical workday. Patients depend on and benefit from expertise and professional reasoning that draws on deep and extensive empirical knowledge. The medical profession recognizes that for an institution to survive and succeed, it is morally, legally, and economically obligated to invest in a continuous cycle of professional education.

Are we not morally obliged in the education profession to elevate expertise continuously so that students and parents can depend on teachers and administrators to be well informed and discerning about the lives of children? Since high-quality classroom instruction has enormous impact on children's academic achievement, schools would be wise to interweave professional study, reflection, and collective problem-solving into the culture and commitments of the organization. If educators are committed to inventing schools that make a difference, schools that beat the odds for student achievement and parent participation, we must embrace systemic professional development as a core investment.

While the principle of increasing *continuity* of practices and resources expands the community of mutual responsibility for closing the achievement gap, the second guiding principle of *continuous professional development* deepens the reservoir of knowledge, tools, and attitudes affecting student learning. Regularly examining research, posing questions, troubleshooting solutions, and practicing proven techniques increase the odds of significant literacy gains for students. Continuity alone may lead teachers to follow a scripted manual without understanding why the lesson is structured that way. But making continuous professional development a core part of school culture and design raises each teacher's ability to answer the "why" behind every action and to make the kind of informed moment-by-moment decisions that accelerate student learning. No software or commercial program can substitute for the differentiated instruction a master teacher can tailor to individual circumstances.

So each year in addition to addressing continuity by asking, "What resources and practices can be made more consistent to advance the goals of our comprehensive literacy system?" I also ask, "How can we support the comprehensive literacy goals with ongoing professional development?" More specifically: What professional development is needed for teachers, administrators, and/or parents to extend a common knowledge base and to expand what we know about making a positive impact on student learning?

Why Continuous and Embedded?

Embedding professional development into the daily school setting is a powerful force for enlarging a district's capacity to create and to maintain high-quality literacy instruction. Although bringing in an occasional outside consultant or sending groups of teachers to workshops may temporarily stimulate actions or fresh possibilities, the potential benefit to the school is no match compared with tailor-made continuous professional development. Site-based professional development can establish internal habits of reflection and initiation. Rather than climates of *blame and complain*, the pervasive response becomes *innovate and actuate*.

Dennis Sparks, emeritus executive director of the National Staff Development Council, cautions schools against overrelying on external sources for professional development. He warns, "Schools can benefit from knowledge and perspectives derived from the outside, but for many schools the balance between internal and external sources of knowledge and action has become so skewed that those in schools no longer see themselves as initiators of action or inventors of solutions to problems" (Sparks 2005, 12). By incorporating site-based professional development into the day-to-day routine, schools can shift faculty attitudes from resignation to renovation.

Offering teachers daily prospects to multiply resources or gain solutions invigorates professional energy. When teachers request ideas for instructing reading fluency, I schedule dates for before-school sessions in which teachers across grades pool resources on what they already do to support and instruct fluency. We look for strategies by such experts as Dr. Timothy Rasinski (2003) or Dr. Richard Allington (2006) to add to the list. The teacher-generated resource on fluency strategies is distributed to the faculty. These brainstorming sessions may inspire some teachers to frame classroom research on fluency. I meet with those teachers to review evidence of student performance, to help frame action research, and to identify relevant sources of support. Teachers eagerly take on new strategies and exchange ideas when they know they will receive an immediate and proactive response to requests for information, clarity, resources, or classroom support. Structures such as release days, reciprocal sharing sessions, instructional coaching, colleague observation, and resource development teams set up conditions for immediate and customized professional development.

In addition, if we expect high levels of professional performance from teachers, just as the Cleveland Clinic sets high standards of quality for their medical staff, we must fortify that expectation with a system-wide commitment to high levels of professional support. Every expectation needs to be backed with measures that guarantee success. When a new approach to reading instruction is introduced, it needs to be backed by the training and resources necessary for knowledgeable implementation. When habits of reflective practice are expected, opportunities for sharing reflections need to be included in staff meetings, evaluation meetings, and professional development days.

To realign our school and district toward a cohesive and comprehensive literacy vision, school leaders need to be selective and deliberate in sanctioning supports that reinforce that vision's intention as opposed to simply funding independent interests. Our comprehensive literacy vision includes complementary instructional frameworks, such as writing workshop, reading workshop, and developmental word study, because these frameworks

emulate differentiated instruction, strategic comprehension, and critical analysis of author's craft. Therefore, we seek professional conferences and authorize professional development sessions that tie these approaches together and deepen the knowledge base for implementation. Otherwise, time, money, and resources might be spent on counterproductive measures.

The most efficient way to offer professional development is to establish a norm of continuous learning and to provide a variety of venues, such as mentoring, training sessions, use of protocols, or professional reading, for meaningful learning to occur at your school. The focus can be tailored to the instructional models and data specific to your setting. Then, you can enjoy the fringe benefits of designing a work environment that empowers and connects a community of learners.

The goal statement of the National Staff Development Council reads, "All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work." *All teachers*. *Daily*. How is that possible when budgets are stretched thin and there is no literacy coach or staff developer?

Well, the first myth to debunk is that professional development depends on a person or a place. The idea that we have to wait until we can hire a professional developer and add on a room for professional development meetings may postpone action. When the perception shifts instead to realizing professional development as a habit or an attitude, countless opportunities reveal themselves.

Chapter 5 will detail a "menu of venues" for professional development, ranging from casual gatherings to formal planned academies, illustrating a variety of pacing and purpose. Figure 3.1 lists thirty nontraditional professional development workshops suggested by the National Staff Development Council (2005, 8). At least twenty suggestions have no overhead cost! So instead of sputtering "yeah, but," with excuses about insufficient resources, think "what if." Many possibilities require little more than the discipline of setting one's *attention* on professional *intentions*.

In our school district, we had to get past the traditional paradigm of perceiving professional development as an expensive line item on the budget by pushing clear of the notion that providing professional development necessitates either a registration fee or the cost of an outside expert. At Moreland Hills Elementary School, we began with article studies and reflection journals and rotated who would host discussions in their classrooms after school. Imagine, for example, asking the faculty this year to select one item from the list in Figure 3.1 to commit to as part of professional goals and practices: How can you support the comprehensive literacy vision with ongoing professional development? How will you increase the capacity for professional reflection and study?

Figure 3.1 The National Staff Development Council's Nontraditional Workshops

IF NOT A WORKSHOP, THEN WHAT?	
1. Conduct action research projects	16. Lead a schoolwide committee or project
2. Analyze teaching cases	17. Participate in lesson study
3. Be observed and receive feedback	18. Map your curriculum
4. Join a cadre of in-house trainers	19. Coach a colleague
5. Plan lessons with a teaching colleague	20. Be a mentor—be mentored
6. Consult an expert	21. Join a professional network
7. Examine student data	22. Use a tuning protocol to examine student work
8. Be coached by a peer or an expert	23. Maintain a professional portfolio
9. Lead a book study	24. Write an article about your work
10. Visit another school	25. Observe other teachers teaching
11. Write assessments with a colleague	26. Read journals, educational magazines, books
12. Participate in a videoconference or conference calls with experts	27. Participate in a critical friends group
13. Do a classroom walk-through	28. Do a self-assessment
14. Give presentations at conferences	29. Shadow a student, a teacher, or another professional in the field
15. Research on the Internet	30. Keep a reflective log or journal

You might begin by gathering a group to re-envision the multiple ways to integrate professional development and reflection practices before, during, or after the typical school hours. Consider an entry point or two where you might recapture time to revitalize and reshape a daily culture of professionalism:

1. Before students arrive

Co-planning

Consulting with a colleague

Integrating lessons across disciplines or roles

Collaboratively troubleshooting or networking ideas

Reviewing student portfolios

2. During school day

Performing action research

Framing a monthly or yearly building-wide professional focus/goal/topic

Coordinating in-house observations and reflections through a specific lens

Coordinating site visits with a partner district

Training sessions

Inviting guest speaker grade-level meetings (specialists in the building)

Encouraging co-teaching sessions

Posting enrichment ideas on shared server

Networking some troubleshooting online through blogs

Organizing parent forums on scheduled topics of interest

Referring to key professional texts

Providing release time for groups with a specific instructional or assessment focus

Reflecting on practice over lunch

3. After students' school day

Demonstrating one technique at staff meeting moments

Leading book/article study groups

Working on specific resource development in teams

Coordinating classroom walk-throughs to observe an environmental element such as word walls

Observing and critiquing student work samples

Mentoring new teachers

4. Summer break

Providing summer academies and/or training sessions

Encouraging/organizing summer project or resource development teams

Suggesting summer professional reading for staff

Encouraging book clubs with parent and student groups

Setting up Moodle dialogues with parents, colleagues, students

In *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, Lois Easton describes a number of methods similar to those listed above and writes, "This type of staff development is powerful because it arises from and returns to the world of teaching and learning. It begins with what will really help young people learn, engages those involved in helping them learn, and has an effect on the classrooms (and schools, districts, and even states) where those students and their teachers learn" (2004, 2).

What Do Teachers Need to Sustain Quality Professional Wisdom?

The ultimate goal in providing continuous professional development is to cultivate and sustain habits of discretionary wisdom among your staff. Daily educational decisions should positively improve levels of student engagement and success. Teachers hold enormous influence and power over young lives, whether or not their actions are intentional. The choice to raise awareness of issues or obstacles, increase appreciation for diversity, and instill knowledge of proven practices is no less than noble.

Wise discretion evolves from a place of empathy, experience, and knowledge. As professional development opportunities are designed, consider what the teachers will need to become keen observers, informed practitioners, and responsive advocates for all learners. What structures, resources, and purposes can be gradually introduced to expand a school's capacity for site-based professional development?

1. Structures that expand capacity for professional development

Skillful school and district leadership (consider many sources)

Variety of professional development options offered throughout the week, month, and year

Designated spaces for large-group professional development

Calendars posting professional development offerings

Instructional schedules that provide shared planning blocks with colleagues

Frequently stated administrative expectations for participation

Procedures for teachers to submit proposals of collaborative study or projects

Budget allocations for texts, materials, guest presenters, and/or food

2. Resources that facilitate professional reflection and critical conversation

Access to data reports directly applicable to setting classroom goals

Sources for professional articles on topics of interest

Space during the school day for teams to work

Access to computers

Rubrics for observing student work

Rubrics for teachers' self-assessment

Design qualities for lessons

Packets of instructional resources or resource templates

Contacts in similar and close-by districts

Reflection journals

Food/snacks

Purchase of professional texts for study and lesson resources

3. Purposes for professional development in literacy

Study the current evidence-based research of what makes a difference

Demonstrate application across flexible settings (i.e., content areas, intervention, grade levels)

Analyze data, target student goals, and design action plans

Self-evaluate and set professional goals

Challenge entrenched assumptions or stereotypes

Read novels used for guided reading; generate questions to spark discussion along with critical points in texts to linger and notice

Hone skills

Share multiple approaches

Generate solutions

Develop common assessments

Practice a skill (taking running records, conferring, blogging)

Learn a new form of technology to augment instruction

Observe technique, student response, teacher prompting, instructional language, instructional environment, management, logistics

Look at student work to determine a teaching point of focused feedback

Set instructional goals based on data/observation

Debrief with colleagues based on focused observations

Train teachers, parents, administrators

Strengthen community relationships and partnerships

Develop resources to help implement quality instruction or home supports

The possibilities are endless and can be specifically tailored to the instructional frameworks, issues, and interests unique to each school setting. So the second guiding principle to consider when planning action steps for continuous improvement and gradually constructing a comprehensive literacy system is *continuous professional development*:

What formats will merge professional development into everyday habits and routines?

When can we recapture time for professional development?

What will facilitate meaningful study for our teachers, parents, and/or administrators?

Providing an array of professional development, embedded into the everyday world of school and customized to specific priorities, sharpens professional judgment and cultivates a culture of lifelong learning. Continuous professional development deepens the integrity and fortifies the success of a comprehensive literacy system. As Roland Barth eloquently states in an interview with Dennis Sparks, "Real learning and accountability will not come from others inflicting their knowledge on teachers but from conditions created in schools that cause teachers to hunger after greater knowledge. That's when the learning curves go off the chart" (Sparks 2002).

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