

The
**BALANCED
VIEW:**

**Research-based
information on
timely topics**

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School reform efforts over the last few decades have dramatically raised expectations for students. In response, teachers increasingly are being called upon to learn new roles and ways of teaching. They are being asked to upgrade their knowledge and skills, master new skills and responsibilities, and change their teaching practices to ensure that all students achieve higher learning standards.

The growing expectations for teachers are generating widespread interest in the form, content, and quality of **professional development**. States and districts across the country are beginning to rethink their teacher development activities to make them more “in- sync” with reform agendas. Major foundations are investing heavily in studies of professional development to identify effective practices and better understand why they work. And cross-state partnerships are forming to create new approaches to professional development that will better serve teachers and students in the years to come.

Given the increased attention to professional development, this edition of the *Balanced View* examines current re-

search on the topic. We review where professional development is today, and the new directions it is taking. We give examples of promising new approaches to teacher development and summarize what researchers say about them. Finally, we discuss the implications of these new directions for policymakers.

Professional Development Today

For many teachers, professional development translates to an afternoon workshop—an inservice that addresses the latest “hot” topic that may or may not be relevant to teachers’ needs. Indeed, in most districts, professional development is characterized by,

- periodic inservice days;
- generic workshops that offer little continuity or application;
- the transfer of knowledge and discrete skills from “experts” to teachers;
- a focus on improving *individual* practices;
- pull-out delivery strategies and/or add-ons to the regular school day.

These short-term activities seldom provide any follow-up assistance, and subsequent in

services may cover entirely different topics. Rarely are teachers helped to think about what the inservice content means for their classrooms, or supported as they apply the content with students.

According to some leading researchers, there are strong incentives for the short-term approach to professional development. Salary schedules in most districts offer increments to teachers for taking additional courses or earning continuing education units by participating in various inservice activities. And state relicensure policies mirror these incentives. Moreover, a multimillion dollar industry supplies the workshops and inservices. For busy district administrators, who control 80 percent of the staff development money, it is far easier to call in an outside expert for a one-shot training session than design a more comprehensive, long-term approach to professional development.

Costs

Little information exists on how much states and school districts actually spend on staff development. What we do know from the research literature is that local districts bear most of the costs.

A handful of studies have furnished cost estimates based

on individual district data. For example, a 1980 study of three

urban districts found professional development expenditures to range from 3.3 percent of the total district budget to 5.5 percent. A more recent investigation of four large districts reported lower estimates: 1.8 percent to 2.8 percent of total operating expenses. And in the 1996 report, *What Matters Most*, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future reported a range of 1 to 3 percent of district resources, based on cost data from a number of individual studies. The Commission concluded that by the standards of other professions and of teacher development in other countries, U.S. school districts invest relatively little in professional development; the limited resources, moreover, are typically spent on unproductive practices. In their recommendations, the Commission described how districts could reallocate resources more strategically to improve the quality of staff development.

Impact

On the whole, researchers agree that conventional forms of professional development have little effect on educator practices, organizational changes, and student outcomes. The prevailing belief is that

typical programs are too top-down and too isolated from classroom realities to make a

difference. Even when there is a link to the classroom, inconsistency and lack of follow-up weaken potential effects on practice. Although there are a few documented examples of effective inservice training programs, these initiatives have emphasized feedback, frequent follow-up, coaching, and other forms of classroom technical assistance that are rarely used by districts.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

Research on what constitutes good professional development is remarkably consistent across many studies. The emerging view represents an "...almost unprecedented consensus among researchers, staff development specialists, and key policymakers," according to researchers Willis Hawley and Linda Valli, who conducted several syntheses of the literature. In general, the research suggests that high quality teacher development,

- is integrated with district goals to improve education;
- is guided by a coherent long-term plan;
- is driven by disaggregated data on student outcomes;
- is designed according to teacher-identified needs;

- is primarily school-based;
- provides a strong foundation in subject content and methods of teaching;
- is informed by research on teaching and learning;
- is designed around collaborative problem-solving;
- enables teachers to work with colleagues, in and beyond their school building;
- is continuous and ongoing, providing follow-up support for further learning;
- incorporates principles of adult learning;
- provides sufficient time and other resources;
- is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Taken together, these principles combine to create a new vision for professional development—one that is able to meet the challenges of systemic educational reform.

Promising Approaches

Several new approaches to professional development have attracted the attention of educators and researchers. These approaches are consistent with the principles outlined above and include the following:

■ *Teacher Networks*— Networks provide teachers with a supportive professional community beyond the school building. They typically are organized around specific subject-

matter, and seek to deepen teachers' understanding of content as well as their facility

with new teaching strategies. Some networks are national in scope, while others cover only one state or region. Members stay in touch via electronic bulletin boards.

■ *Joint Work*— Joint work refers to shared responsibility for tasks such as team teaching, curriculum writing, assessment development, or other jobs that create interdependence and cooperation among teachers. Joint work promotes on-the-job learning because it facilitates productive exchanges among teachers and reflection about practice.

■ *Collaborations Between Schools and Colleges*— A number of organizations such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Pew Charitable Trusts are actively promoting partnerships between colleges and K-12 schools. These cooperative programs not only help teachers to gain access to new knowledge, they enable professors to develop new understandings of how to teach their students.

■ *Professional Development Schools*— These schools, which are roughly analogous to teaching hospitals, are a special form of collaboration between K-12 schools and higher education. While much attention has been given to their role in

preservice, they also are playing an important role in ongoing professional development,

bringing both novice and experienced teachers together with university faculty to improve practice.

■ *Teacher Research Projects*— Increasing numbers of teachers are conducting research in their classrooms and schools in cooperation with their colleagues and university faculty. While some of these research projects are defined by academic interests, many are directed at problems identified by teachers themselves. The major activity in teacher research is the collection and analysis of data for the purpose of understanding and improving practice.

■ *Mentor Programs*— Through mentoring programs, highly experienced teachers play a leadership role in guiding the activities of other teachers. Mentoring programs often match beginning teachers with veterans, enabling the veterans to share their knowledge and expertise.

■ *Peer Coaching*— Like mentoring, peer coaching allows teachers to build more collegial relationships, share their experiences, and assume more responsibility for the quality of teaching. Coaching programs usually involve teachers on the same professional level.

Teachers observe each other's classrooms and offer feedback on practices and behaviors.

In addition to these approaches, some schools are experimenting with alternative models of **school time** to accommodate ongoing professional development. Strategies include: a) restructuring time by altering the traditional school calendar or day; b) purchasing time by using early retirees or foundation-supported "substitute banks," or by compensating teachers for after-hours work; c) finding common time by developing schedules with common planning periods; and d) making better use of current time by freeing teachers from some non-instructional duties.

Some schools are also using **technology** to make quality staff development more accessible to teachers. Through the Internet, video- and audioconferencing, and electronic bulletin boards, teachers in these schools have been able to access both instructional resources and collegial networks to improve practice.

Research on Promising Approaches

Impact assessments of new models of professional development are just beginning to emerge. Reviews of this work, conducted by several national organizations and respected re-

searchers, indicate the following: schools and districts that engage in new forms of professional development typically have **higher levels of student achievement** than other schools; in addition, teachers in these schools more often engage in reform-oriented practice and are **more effective in the classroom**.

In *What Matters Most*, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future reported that states that improved the most in student achievement during the 1990s, made the most substantial investments in ongoing professional development. Conversely, states that did not invest heavily in efforts to improve teaching were much less successful with students.

Although these findings are promising, far more research is needed to guide policy and practice, particularly concerning the effects of the different staff development models.

Policy Implications

Going to scale with new forms of professional development requires a fresh mindset and bold action. Among the steps state and local policymakers can take to move staff development in the right direction are the following:

- Increase awareness among educational leaders and the public about the need for quality staff development.

- Review policies and incentives that shape staff development and determine what changes may be needed to support educational reform.
- Set standards and priorities for the design, conduct, and content of professional development.
- Increase the time available for teacher interaction and ongoing staff development.
- Support the adoption of promising approaches to professional development.
- Make greater use of outstanding teachers in staff development activities.

What policymakers should *avoid* is investing in a single approach to professional development, or expanding resources without attending to quality. Above all, policymakers need to be aware of the risks of focusing on the short-term, immediate needs generated by school reform agendas. Professional development in a climate of educational reform is a long-term process.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future
www.tc.columbia.edu/~teachcomm/

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments on this topic. References used are available upon request.