Editor’s Note: To improve instruction, schools are empowering teachers through effective professional development. In this Spotlight, learn how districts are using the talents of teachers in meaningful leadership roles and supporting teachers in sharing their expertise.

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Districts Turn to Teachers to Lead

Rising demands push principals to tap teacher talent

By Denisa R. Superville

Marilyn Boerke, the principal of Liberty Middle School in Camas, Wash., a district of 6,400 students along the Columbia River, applauds the district’s philosophy that encourages teachers to serve in school leadership roles and actively creates opportunities for them to do so.

Teachers are being recruited by the district—and many are stepping up—to run professional-development sessions, coach their peers, and help adapt curriculum to the common-core standards.

“We were dying on the vine as building administrators trying to manage everything that we needed to manage,” said Ms. Boerke, who has been a principal for nine years.

As principals’ responsibilities continue to grow, Camas and other like-minded districts are tapping their teacher corps to create meaningful leadership roles that are meant to address a number of pressing issues in public schools: reduce stress on building administrators, improve teaching and learning, and help retain new and veteran educators.

The teacher-leadership concept is not entirely new: In a sense, teachers have been leading for as long as they have been teaching. But the movement was infused with new vigor last year with the announcement of the Teach-to-Lead Initiative, a partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The nation’s two largest teaching unions—teachers who have displayed stellar leadership skills and are superior teachers. They should have access to professional development and training in areas that include leading and working with adult leaders, curriculum, and communication. They should receive a stipend or other compensation as recognition of the role’s importance to the school.

The intentional development of teacher-leadership roles is still nascent in the United States when compared with England. There, leaders, the broader set of teachers in the school feel like the decisionmaking is more transparent and inclusive. They feel valued, they are more likely to feel that the school is a place where the principals care about teachers [and] listen to their voices.”

“Effective principals understand that they need to tap into the talents of their most effective teachers to make sure that they have the largest impact on student achievement,” said Lindsay Sobel, the executive director of Teach Plus Massachusetts, a chapter of the national organization that trains teacher-leaders to work in challenging urban schools, including in Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Memphis, Tenn. The group’s signature T3 initiative prepares teacher-leaders to work in turnaround schools. “When that's done in a very thoughtful and structured way, that's when you see the real change. It's not just a matter of principals delegating, but [a matter] of a real, thoughtful implementation of teacher leadership.”

Groups that are focused on preparing teacher-leaders say the roles must be clearly defined and fit the school’s and district’s needs. Leaders should go through a rigorous selection process and should be those who should receive a stipend or other compensation as recognition of the role’s importance to the school.

The intentional development of teacher-leadership roles is still nascent in the United States when compared with England. There, teachers know from the first day on the job the leadership roles they can assume and the training—education, professional development, and practical experiences—that they need to get there, according to Jonathan A. Supovitz, the director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, in his recent paper, “Building a Lattice for School Leadership,” which compares leadership development in the United States and England.

Clear Defined Roles

The arguments for expanding teacher-leadership opportunities are many, but boil down to this: Principals simply cannot be expected to do the job alone. Advocates say that developing a competent back bench of teacher-leaders may help stem high principal-turnover rates—studies show that 50 percent of principals leave their schools after three years—and increase retention for both new and veteran teachers.

Groups that are focused on preparing teacher-leaders say the roles must be clearly defined and fit the school’s and district’s needs. Leaders should go through a rigorous selection process and should be those who have displayed stellar leadership skills and are superior teachers. They should have access to professional development and training in areas that include leading and working with adult leaders, curriculum, and communication. They should receive a stipend or other compensation as recognition of the role’s importance to the school.

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What we see is that when teachers are included in decisionmaking processes, when they are included as leaders, the broader set of teachers in the school feel like the decisionmaking is more transparent and inclusive. They feel valued, they are more likely to feel that the school is a place where the principals care about teachers [and] listen to their voices.”

Scott Thompson
Deputy Chief of Human Capital,
District of Columbia Public Schools
A Fresh Approach: Blended Learning for Professional Development

By Thera Pearce | Director of Professional Development

We are lucky to be educators at a time when the education model is finally shifting. The century-old tradition of direct teaching is in the process of adapting to a much more personalized experience, and technology plays a very important role in this shift. However, as learning changes for students, the support given to teachers must also evolve. The question becomes how to provide ongoing, relevant, job-embedded, and engaging professional development with limited resources. The solution is Blended Learning for teachers—personalized professional development that provides the educator with what they need, when they need it, and where they are able to access it.

Such an approach provides a more efficient model for educator growth than the traditional “one and done” workshop model of the past. It enables teacher leaders to plan support sessions with careful consideration to the amount of class time that is interrupted, and it supports a collaborative environment where teachers are able to work together during common planning time while also devoting time and energy to their own personalized learning and growth.

A culture of change is an important factor of the effective transition to Blended Learning for teachers. Just as a set of detailed and consistent standards help prepare students for success, a framework can also support the development of Blended Learning for teachers. Adopting and implementing Blended Learning at scale means that both teachers and administrators have a solid understanding of the new role of teachers in a blended environment. Combining development opportunities with content, technology, and pedagogy provides educators with a comprehensive growth plan that is personalized to each individual, and models the teaching practices expected in the classroom.

iNACOL, in partnership with The Learning Accelerator, developed a competency model to support teacher development that is specific to Blended Learning. Blended Learning techniques will shift and adapt to the new technologies that become available and thus the authors acknowledge that this framework must be dynamic and act as “the floor, rather than the ceiling.” The framework is designed to support the development of effective Blended Learning teachers, which iNACOL describes as having the following characteristics and beliefs:

**High expectations and commitment to achieving equitable outcomes.** Teachers create rigorous but supportive environments in which students are held to high expectations academically and behaviorally. They seek evidence of achievement of goals. Further, in order to help all students meet these high expectations, teachers move beyond a traditional notion of providing each student with the same and equal inputs towards a focus on equity in both inputs and outcomes. They are willing and able to apply more and different resources to certain learners who need them to achieve.
Desire to move towards competency-based learning. Teachers recognize that not all students learn at the same pace, and that mastery of knowledge and skills is a better measure of learning than time on task. Given this, teachers measure progress against competency attainment and find ways to meet students where they are along their learning path rather than adhere to one-size-fits-all schedules or sequences of instructional events.

Valuing all learners—including those with different skills, exceptionalities, and needs. In seeking to personalize their instruction, teachers recognize that all students bring different strengths and needs to the table, including those with identified disabilities. They are aware of different learning preferences, diversity, and universal design principles, and appropriately differentiate and adapt to meet these differences.

Motivated teachers have always held students to high expectations and showed sincere concern with the individual needs of students, however, as technology advances, more tools have become available to support teachers and students in constructing a more personalized experience. As we learn more about what Blended Learning is and how it works best, it is important to set a bar—an adjustable bar—that identifies the characteristics of excellent Blended Learning teachers and supports their ongoing professional development.

Our mission at DreamBox Learning is to radically transform the way the world learns, and in order to do this, we understand the importance of supporting the development of these qualities. This means a dedication to the creation of curriculum and tools to support students and teachers in their Blended Learning journeys. Intelligent Adaptive Learning™ technology is designed to shift the learning paradigm by personalizing the learning experience for students so that they are challenged, encouraged, and engaged in an individual way. We start by thinking about the student and then develop a structure that teachers and administrators can use to guide students through the learning process.

Professional development for teachers is essential for ongoing growth toward best practices and innovation in education. Teachers remain some of the most influential figures in a student’s life. Educators deserve the opportunity to advance professionally so they may facilitate current, engaging, and relevant learning in their classrooms.

DreamBox Learning is dedicated to supporting educator growth through designing professional development resources that are flexible and meet teachers where they are on their own teaching journey. We have developed engaging and relevant materials within an easy-to-access platform that support teacher learning by connecting the content from the course with the pedagogical approaches of the classroom. Our approach blends technology, content, and pedagogy to provide engaging and relevant professional development that allows teachers to access what they want when they want it. Personalized educator learning should be no more than a click away.

Thera Pearce is the Director of Professional Development for DreamBox Learning. Pearce has been a teacher since 1998. She taught special education for eight years, and then moved into a curriculum and instruction role where she worked with teachers in Wake County, North Carolina. Pearce currently manages the Professional Development Team at DreamBox Learning.
Some districts have been actively working to fix the deficiency that Mr. Supovitz identified. Boston and the District of Columbia, for example, have built career ladders into their teachers’ union contracts and provide additional compensation for each step.

‘Transparent and Inclusive’

Through Leadership Initiative For Teachers, or LIFT, teachers in the District of Columbia’s system can move to “advanced,” “distinguished,” and “expert” teachers, earning more money along the way and qualifying to serve in greater leadership capacities. An advanced teacher can serve as an ambassador who helps with teacher recruitment and selection, for example, while a distinguished teacher can apply for a number of prestigious fellowships, including one that allows select educators to work on K-12 policy issues and another for high-performing secondary mathematics teachers.

In 2013, the district also created Teacher-Leadership Innovation, or TLI, a hybrid teacher-leadership position that allows teachers to spend up to half their time in the classroom and half serving in a leadership role. Some coach and mentor other teachers, lead new approaches to teaching writing, or serve as a steppingstone for future principals, others see them as inherently important roles as a steppingstone for future principals, others see them as inherently important roles that should exist at every school and that are critical to building strong, successful schools.

In the Camas district, for example, administrators leaned on teacher-leaders to draft the district’s template for writing and measuring student-growth goals, which are required under Washington state’s teacher-evaluation system. Without the teacher-leaders, the task would have fallen on principals, who were already juggling a host of other duties, said Ms. Boerke, the principal of Camas’ Liberty Middle School.

There was also another positive outcome from using teacher-leaders: The resulting model was accepted by teachers because they had devised the framework, the time frame for evaluation, and the tools of evidence that would be used, she said.

Ms. Boerke said teachers can also lead professional development in ways that administrators cannot. By relying more on the expertise of their teachers, Ms. Boerke said she has additional time to observe what is happening in the classrooms.

“I just love my work again,” Ms. Boerke said. “If we want to retain principals, this is what we need to do—it’s share the workload, share the responsibility for teaching and learning. ... When those test scores come out, I feel like I have a team, that we can work through what went well, what didn’t go well, as opposed to me seeing it all by myself. More brains are better than one. Anytime you collaborate with like-minded people, amazing things can happen.”

Marilyn Boerke
Principal, Liberty Middle School, Camas, Washington
n early September, math teachers from across Kent County, Md., gathered for their first professional learning community meetings of the school year. Kris Hemstetter, a math and English/language arts coach for the 2,200-student district, was working with a small group of 3rd through 5th grade teachers and urged them to keep in mind “where our kids are, and where they’re going.”

Ms. Hemstetter was referring to a shift in the Common Core State Standards for mathematics known as “coherence,” the idea that math concepts should be linked both within and across grade levels. Unlike many previous state standards, the common core puts a heavy emphasis on coherent instruction, and consequently, many districts are finding ways to familiarize teachers with standards other than the ones they teach.

For the second year in a row, the elementary teachers in Ms. Hemstetter’s district are meeting monthly in cross-grade sessions after school, rather than in the grade-level silos previously used, to go over math concepts and instructional methods. For Ms. Hemstetter, the goal is to get teachers talking about how skills build on each other.

Many experts say organizing these kinds of cross-grade-level professional learning experiences is one of the best ways to encourage coherent instruction. While teachers can study the “progressions documents” associated with the standards, which outline student-learning sequences for particular math topics, those texts can be tough to penetrate without support. Intergrade professional learning, though logistically difficult, gives educators a chance to teach each other about the complicated learning progressions inherent in the standards, they say.

Math naturally lends itself to fluid instruction, according to Phil Daro, a senior fellow at America’s Choice, a Washington-based school improvement consulting group owned by Pearson Inc., and a lead writer of the common standards for math. But state academic standards have tended not to make fluidity a focus until now.

“Traditionally in the U.S., we taught one arithmetic for whole numbers and taught a second and different arithmetic for fractions, and then we taught a third arithmetic for expressions with letters in them,” he said. “Whereas mathematically, you could do it all with one arithmetic.” Other countries, including Singapore and Japan, have done a better job of teaching students to apply the same principles to many different types of problems, Mr. Daro said.

Coherence is named in the common standards, along with “rigor” and “focus,” as one of the three major mathematical “shifts” from previous state standards. “Mathematics is not a list of disconnected topics, tricks, or mnemonics; it is a coherent body of knowledge made up of interconnected concepts,” the standards document says. “Therefore, the standards are designed around coherent progressions from grade to grade.”

Dense Documents

The standards ask students to “apply and extend previous understandings” when learning new skills—an indirect reference to cross-grade coherence. For instance, students are expected to use what they learned about multiplication in 3rd grade to multiply fractions by whole numbers in 5th grade, and then again when dividing fractions by fractions in 6th grade.

“As a teacher, what it means is you really should be familiar with the whole program, not just the part of the program where you add on new knowledge,” said Mr. Daro.

While many math teachers have long sought to ensure their instruction is consistent with what’s taught in other grades, the common core has made that objective more explicit, while seeking to make the connections more readily apparent.

The common standards for math were developed out of a series of documents, based on research about students’ cognitive development, that detail how instruction on a particular topic should advance over time. The standards’ writers took those “progressions documents” and divided the skills into grade levels at which they should be taught. The progressions documents can now be found on Achieve the Core, a website hosted by the New York City-based nonprofit group Student Achievement Partners, which was
founded by the lead standards writers. The documents are, in a word, dense. But they do offer insight into how skills build on one another, and most experts on the standards suggest teachers consult them. “What I’ve been recommending is that people form book clubs or study groups and read those progressions together,” said Mr. Daro. “They’re not written to be read while sipping a cup of tea. They’re written to be studied, and you don’t study alone.”

Three to five elementary teachers could meet once a week for a month to read a single progression, he said. “Will that be enough for them to understand everything in the progression? Probably not. Will that advance their mathematical thinking? Surely it will.”

The progressions documents take a lot of “unpacking,” said Ms. Hemstetter. Even so, she tells teachers to put them by their desks, along with the standards. “It’s not an easy read sometimes, but every time you read a portion of that progression document, it’s going to make more sense to you,” she said.

**Cross-Grade Connections**

At a professional development conference held by the Maryland education department in August, a small group of teachers gathered at a session on fractions division. As the teachers discussed whether students should convert improper fractions to mixed numbers, which the common standards do not require, high school teacher Kevin Wajek chimed in from the back of the room. “As soon as you cross into high school, that’s the answer I want,” he said in reference to improper fractions. “Unless it’s a recipe, do not use mixed numbers again.” The middle school teachers turned his way to consider the plea.

The moment exemplified the way cross-grade learning can contribute to coherent instruction in math. Mr. Wajek, the math department chairman at Severna Park High School, in Maryland, said in an interview that coherence goes both ways—high school teachers need to know the beginnings of the learning progressions as well. “I should understand where that conceptual understanding came from, so that I can say, ‘Remember when ...’ and point to what students learned in previous grades,” he said.

Windy Hill Middle School, in the 15,900-student Calvert County, Md., district, began organizing professional learning communities across grade levels three years ago, when the school first introduced the common core. “We may discuss a topic we’ll talk about in 7th grade, and tie it into a topic in 6th grade, and where they’re going with it in 8th grade,” said Dawn Caine, a math teacher at the school. The middle school teachers have also met with 5th grade teachers from the nearby elementary schools at times, she said.

As of yet, though, that kind of cross-grade integration isn’t common practice in middle schools, according to Steven Leinwand, a principal research analyst at the Washington-based American Institutes for Research who specializes in math education. “Most middle school teachers are meeting as [single-grade] team—one math, one English, one social studies, and one science teacher,” he said, calling that a major problem.

Cross-grade-level meetings have been helpful for Chris Austin, a 4th and 5th grade math teacher at Rock Hall Elementary in Rock Hall, Md., who attends Ms. Hemstetter’s professional learning community. Working with teachers below her grade level has given her a firmer grasp on the progressions. “I’m not as familiar with the 3rd grade document, so she can remind me to take it down a notch,” she said, pointing to a colleague who teaches 3rd grade. Knowing the progressions below her grade also allows her to fill in gaps for her students, Ms. Austin explained.

“We didn’t have progression documents before the common core to see why does this make sense,” said Ms. Hemstetter. Now, in the professional learning communities, “we can unpack the progression document, look at student work, and analyze 2nd through 5th grade to see why these progressions make sense,” she said. “It’s about the conversations.”

Coverage of the implementation of college- and career-ready standards is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.
sional learning with high-octane peers with all sorts of professional and social supports,” Mr. Klemmer said. “This is a program of study for teachers—not for budding [administrative] leaders, not for policy wonks—differentially by experience level and performance level. That does not exist anywhere [else] in the country.”

Case Studies

NAATE, founded in 2009 and based in Newport, R.I., brings together cohorts of about 60 core-content teachers from traditional public, charter, and private schools for intensive, 350-hour programs that take place either mostly within a school year (in designated week-long sessions) or over two summers. More than 300 teachers have completed the academy, which is now recruiting its next two cohorts.

Selection criteria are intended to be strict: Each participant has to be identified by his or her principal as a top-performing teacher and have at least three years of teaching experience. That’s in part because one of the program’s aims is to propel teachers who have already made their mark in some sense—many are already serving as department or grade-level chairs. But it’s also because, put simply, NAATE’s curriculum is designed to be intellectual and demanding in a way much of what currently passes as professional development generally is not.

Rather than lectures on the latest policy shifts or a garden-variety pedagogical topic, NAATE’s programming hews closer to business school methodologies. Each “fellow” is given a thick notebook of articles and research studies to read before arriving.

The actual sessions consist of the fellows analyzing case studies of pedagogical challenges, such as the one involving Mr. Chen, or of other leadership qualities (one case study focuses on the Arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton) during which participants are encouraged to synthesize knowledge from the readings and apply it to K-12 settings. The conversations also continue in smaller study groups to which each fellow is assigned at the beginning of the program.

Challenging Conversations

It’s the deep dialogue about the craft of teaching that most appeals to Emilio Solano, a teacher at the Sandra Cisneros campus of the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, located in the diverse Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles.

A six-year veteran tapped for NAATE after winning a teaching award from Teach For America, Mr. Solano said he was initially somewhat skeptical of the program and more than a little intimidated by its demands. But his first five-day session changed his mind.

“I loved the conversations with people,” Mr. Solano said. “I think I learn really well from other people's insights, and as I always tell my students, ‘That’s how we grow’—by understanding people’s different perspectives, by discussing, by disagreeing.”

Even so, being around so many top-performing peers can be eye-opening—at times, uncomfortably so.

“For teachers who have been told they’re the best, coming into a room full of high-performing teachers can be earth-shattering,” said Deborah Levitzky, the academy’s chief program officer and founding director. “It can be difficult for those who have not had their opinions challenged.”

The conversations with equally talented peers may be the heart of the NAATE program, but there are other important components, too. Each teacher’s interactions are observed by staff or graduates of NAATE, who then provide daily written feedback.

“We hear from so many teachers that in the part of their career that they're in, they get very infrequent feedback other than, ‘You're doing a great job,’” Ms. Levitzky said. So the reflections they receive during their program focuses on topics of relevance to their school interactions.

“Are they rooting comments in evidence? Are they able to see the nuance in the cases? Are they helping move the conversation, making way for other peers who are quieter to speak, thinking about the implications of their participation?” she said.

Future Goals

At $12,000 per teacher, NAATE is not cheap, though it’s a bargain in comparison to similar offerings in business and even some master’s degree programs in education. Additional support for the program comes mainly through philanthropies. The group has received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Walton Family Foundation, among others. (Education Week also receives funding from those philanthropies to support coverage of academic standards, innovation, and parent empowerment, respectively.)

Participating districts include the Shelby school district in Memphis, Tenn., and the New Haven district in Connecticut, in addition to several large charter-management organizations, such as Rocketship and Achievement First, and at least two Catholic archdioceses.

Where NAATE’s model fits within the broader policy apparatuses of K-12 professional development remains somewhat in flux. Its voluntary nature stands in contrast to much teacher training in the United States, which tends to be inscribed in contracts, school schedules, and state licensing rules. As its leaders acknowledge, NAATE’s philosophy of change is a bottom-up one, and the program likely would not work as a mandatory exercise.

But its leaders’ long-term goals are nonetheless bold. NAATE officials have begun to pilot a second program for school leaders. And one day, they think that a critical mass of NAATE-trained educators could truly “turn around” a struggling school.

For now, though, Mr. Solano is simply looking forward to the end of the month, when his cohort will reconvene for its second five-day session.

“They’ve gotten me hooked,” he said. “It’s just so different.”
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—Melissa Brady, Assistant Principal, Stubbs Elementary School, DE

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COMMENTARY

World-Class Teacher Professional Development: Neither Workshops Nor Rubrics

By Marc Tucker

There is a large literature on teachers’ professional development. Unfortunately, it is mostly about the provision of workshops. I doubt that anyone is surprised to learn that workshops that teachers attend only because they are required to do so and are paid to attend workshops that typically provide tools to address problems they do not think they have and no tools to address the problems they do think they have—result in very little discernible benefit to anyone. I have just described a very large industry.

In recent years, another industry has arisen which claims to offer a new path to effective professional development: I refer to the development of standards for effective teaching and rubrics for judging whether teachers have the skills and knowledge called for by the standards. The best known of these systems is the one developed by Charlotte Danielson. It conjures up the image of a school principal sitting in the back of a classroom with a clipboard running through a list of dozens of different criteria for good teaching, each with its own rubric, page after page after page of this, trying to make fair judgments about the teachers’ performance. As Dylan Wiliam has observed, standards and rubrics can be used to judge performance if done well, but they tell the individual very little about how to improve their performance. Does anyone suppose that this is how partners in our best law firms develop the professional skills of young associates? Or the way that the colonels in the US Army develop the combat skills of the officers who report directly to them? For centuries, great artists learned their trade by apprenticing to the masters. Do you suppose the masters carried around clipboards full of standards and rubrics?

The central issue here, in my view, is not how to conduct an effective workshop or how to judge an individual’s performance, but how to improve that individual’s competence. More precisely, the issue is how to design schools to create an environment in which the professional competence of the whole faculty is constantly improving. As you will see, I think the answer to this question has very little to do with workshops and even less to do with clipboards and reams of standards and rubrics. It has to do with organizational design. It is mainly a matter of getting the incentives and supports right.

The aim is to improve teachers’ expertise. One of the now-famous findings of the literature on expertise is that it takes roughly ten years to become expert in virtually any field. But teachers, on average, stay in teaching only five years. So it may be that the most important thing we can do to improve teachers’ professional competence is make the occupation sufficiently attractive to induce them to stick around long enough to become expert and then keep them in teaching long enough to enable their students to reap the rewards of their accumulated expertise.

But that same literature makes it clear that longevity does not by itself create expertise. One gets expert only by working hard and continuously to improve one’s competence.

And indeed, recent research shows that teachers’ competence seems to top out after three years, long before they can be said to be truly expert teachers. I suspect that this has something to do with the incentives teachers have to improve their game. I would argue that teachers’ competence does not improve on average after three years because by that time, they are good enough at their work to get by and then have neither the incentive nor support to work hard to get better. For most teachers, the job they have on their last day in the classroom is the same as it was on the day they became a teacher. Contrast this with the law firm, or the military or an engineering firm. Focus for a moment on the law firm. Recent law school graduates don’t sign up to be junior associates for the rest of their lives. Their aim is to make partner, maybe senior partner, maybe even managing partner. As they move up the ladder, they get more pay, more responsibility, more autonomy and greater status in the eyes of their colleagues and in the larger community. My guess is that the regard if not the admiration of their colleagues is worth at least as much as the pay to them.

Most teachers expect to be paid to develop their professional competence. But if the same people were doctors or engineers, they would be keeping up with their field on their own time and at their own expense. Why? Because gaining the expertise they need to stay current is the key to advancement in their chosen profession. But there is no career path for teachers unless they leave teaching. Without an incentive to learn, most will learn enough to get by and then stop. This is characteristic of blue-collar work but not of professional work.

Professional learning in organizations built around high-status professionals is a very important function of the firm. The same is true in the military. People higher up on the career ladder are judged in no small measure on their success at identifying promising junior people, providing them with growth opportunities, coaching them along the way, suggesting things to read when they are likely to benefit from them, providing them with access to just the right internal and external formal training when they need it and so on.

What we are seeing in the top performing countries in education is very much what I just described. The system cannot be implemented without well-designed career ladders. Without career ladders, there is no career. And, if we cannot offer real careers in teaching, we will not be able to keep or attract to teaching the very people we most want—those who have what it takes to go into the high-
Teachers as Researchers: Changing the Dynamics of PD

By Charles Gleek

We’ve all been there; sitting in large group, professional development workshops facilitated using instructional practices we would never inflict on our own students.

While I sincerely hope that none of us have endured sessions like those Strauss (2014) highlights in the Washington Post, the stark reality is that most professional development schemes are divorced from what most of us see as ways of improving our practice.

Just as one-size-fits-all, top-down administered assessments do not yield generalizable results about individual student learning, so too do packaged, facilitator-centric, schemes for improving the quality of instructional practice neglect the ways each of us wish to improve our professional practice.

As professionals, we often comply with school, district, or company mandates to sit and participate in obligatory training workshops. But just as authoritarian systems perpetually struggle to keep individuals oriented towards an arbitrary slate of objectives, such mass-produced, facilitator-centered, schemes for improving the quality of instructional practice neglect the ways each of us wish to improve our professional practice.

As professionals, we often comply with school, district, or company mandates to sit and participate in obligatory training workshops. But just as authoritarian systems perpetually struggle to keep individuals oriented towards an arbitrary slate of objectives, such mass-produced, facilitator-centered, schemes for improving the quality of instructional practice plans often fail because they are not constructed around the interests of those who are subjected to them.

As such, we often passively adopt or resist our mandated professional development programs, doing just enough to tick the boxes or complete the review form, so only to return to what matters most: learning.

Individuals are motivated by a variety of factors, but some are more important than others. Daniel Pink (2009) makes the case that our intrinsic motivation to do anything—to work, live, and play—lies in the degree to which we have autonomy over what we do, can work toward mastery of capabilities, and do so with a meaningful sense of purpose.

Pink’s ideas align very well with what we know about learning engagement; the extent to which an individual’s behavior is positively aligned with an organization’s values, outcomes, or activities. Specifically, learning engagement is a function of an individual’s behavioral, emotional, and cognitive capabilities as well as a learner’s relationship with their instructor. (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

It is this disconnect between what we know as professionals, many of us researchers in our own right, and the practice we are subjected to when we take part in workshops that do not align with our intrinsic motivation to improve our instructional practice. What is needed is a system of continual professional development that is personalized and relevant to the questions we have about our individual classrooms and students.

What then is the alternative? First and foremost, we need to reframe the argument about what we do as teachers. We are not simply cogs in what Friere (2000) describes as “the banking system” of education.

Teachers are social scientists. We study human behavior, largely learning but certainly other forms of behavior in our classrooms as well. We test the different approaches and methods of learning work to improve the ways in which our students understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and communicate their knowledge in a variety of settings.

As teachers, we occupy a unique position to report on an individual student’s learning, including prescriptions for improvement and celebrations of success, in ways that no grade, transcript, or standardized test can ever do.

In short, we are not simply facilitators of content and standards; we are the agents best positioned to provide an objective assessment about student learning in a rigorously scientific fashion. Ignoring or marginalizing these capabilities is not simply a disservice to our students and parents, it is a theft of the intellectual property that each teacher brings to their craft.

Professional development should be rooted in action research. Teachers are singularly situated to ask questions about learning in their classrooms. Teachers gather information and data about their students all the time, whether it’s derived from internal and external assessments,
formative evaluations, or even from feedback they receive from the students themselves (see Quinton & Smallbone, 2010).

In all cases, this data should be used to drive the process of inquiry, to review what others have done, and to design a plan for research. In addition, teachers should be conducting research, reporting their findings, and reflecting on the research process itself as an act of continual scholarship (Mertler, 2012).

This process embeds and celebrates a culture of learning in our professional practice, just as it models best practices of investigation and reflection for our students and families to observe and emulate.

Individual teachers should no longer be subjected to mandated, mass-training workshops. Rather, we should have the capacity to define our professional development goals in light of the questions we have about the approaches to teaching and learning that exist in our own classrooms as well as those of the organization which we choose to work in.

Teachers who share and identify similar lines of inquiry in their classes can collaborate on large-N studies, with the prospect of presenting their findings to as wide an academic and community audience as they wish. Teachers who feel they are in need of revision or training on action research methods can choose to align themselves in affinity cohorts in order to position themselves for effective inquiry in their classrooms. Such an individualized approach to professional development corresponds to the same sort of personalized learning we strive for with our students year in, year out.

Centering our professional development in action research offers limitless possibilities to personalize improvements in our practice, especially as we seek to enhance the learning experiences of our students.

If we truly want to facilitate change in education, to empower individual teachers to make informed choices about the ways they can improve their craft, their learning, and their lives each and every day, then we must treat teachers as the professional researchers that they are.

References


About Dr. Charles Gleek: Charlie teaches Global Politics courses in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program at North Broward Preparatory School, as well as graduate courses International and Comparative Education in the Ross College of Education at Lynn University; both schools are in South Florida. You can find Charlie on Twitter discussing everything from #TTOG and #sunchat to world politics, music, and Manchester United at @games_frontiers.

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COMMENTARY

The Future of Professional Development Is Teacher Empowerment

By Brian Rainville

During my years as a teacher in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), I saw many sides of professional development. In my first two years of teaching, my school was part of a district-wide purchase of new reading and math curricula. During our professional development days in those years, our district administrators gathered teachers by grade level and an outside firm coached us on how to use our new curricula.

Even though attendance was mandatory, I didn’t go to very many of these sessions. After two days of lost time, I decided I was willing to “pay the piper” if I was caught and ignored my marching orders. Instead, I went into my own classroom and worked alone on exploring ways to improve at my craft. I used those days to create lesson plans and materials that reflected my aspirations as a teacher. I knew the time I spent alone pursuing professional development was not ideal, but I believed that it was more productive than the didactic “sit and get” alternative.

It turns out that I was lucky for a few reasons. First, there were other opportunities for me to pursue my professional learning in Baltimore. It didn’t take me long to find a community of teachers that gathered monthly to improve their craft. Crammed into the classroom of Linda Eberhart, a Maryland State Teacher of the Year whose math students were the highest-performing class in the state, the group focused on learning as much as we could from her success and sharing strategies from our own work. What I learned in these informal sessions connected directly to my work in the classroom and impacted practice in the immediate- and long-term.

Second, BCPSS was getting smarter about PD, and fast. The district retired the mandatory “sit and get”-style sessions. In-
stead, administrators asked teachers to select from a menu of sessions that were presented by other effective Baltimore teachers like Linda. The district asked Linda to become the director of mathematics in the Office of Teaching and Learning. And, supported by a federal grant, the district began to focus on identifying and supporting teacher leaders to provide developmental programming and support for their colleagues. Teacher leaders opened their classrooms so that anyone who signed up—principals, teachers, and coaches—could observe their practices, and teacher leaders held collaborative “office hours” to workshop issues, connect with peers, and share best practices.

During my time in Baltimore, BCPSS developed toward what I believe is the future of professional development for teachers in the United States. We moved from undifferentiated mandatory professional learning to platforms for local teachers to share their strategies for excellence and what was working in their classrooms for their students. Unfortunately, the grant money for some of BCPSS’s most path-breaking work ran out, and many projects were curtailed. What kind of community of practice might have blossomed in Baltimore if the support had continued? Learning from my time in Baltimore, I believe successful professional development platforms, systems, and programs will have two main components:

1. Structures for showcasing, sharing, and validating practices that are effective in the classrooms of superior teachers

2. Ongoing opportunities for teachers to reflect in collaborative, supportive groups on changes to their teaching practice

Jal Mehta, an associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), leads the project “Building a Knowledge Base to Support Teaching,” which is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Jal shared with me in a recent conversation: “Teachers come up to me all the time and ask, ‘I’m teaching 11th grade science in Arkansas. What do I do to improve?’ I tell them to find other 11th grade science teachers in Arkansas and learn with them.”

Jal’s idea, that teachers learn best from other teachers who teach the same subjects and grade levels and are in similar settings, is not new to the world of education. Teachers pursue this kind of personalized professional learning with their peers organically.

Paul Bruno, a former middle school teacher and education blogger, reflected on the best professional development he experienced: “Teachers at my school started using PD time to give mini-presentations to other teachers in the school. We presented mini-lessons or strategies that others could apply with the kids because we had the same kids. We were able to walk out with our confidence boosted, and it gave me something to walk away with that I could and did use in my own classroom.”

There is a massive amount of expertise sitting in the classrooms of our teachers. The challenge to putting that expertise to work is two-fold. First, we need to recognize the legitimacy of teachers’ knowledge about what works in classrooms and prioritize sharing that expertise. Second, we need a structure or a set of structures that allow teachers to pull the curtain back so they can see into the practices of successful peers working in contexts like theirs. Right now teaching is concealed—it is very difficult for teachers to see into the practices of their peers in a way that is efficient or scalable.

Redesigning professional development systems to align with teachers’ classroom expertise and best practices is a challenging task, and it won’t happen overnight. Still, like the teachers at Paul Bruno’s school found, there are ways to create professional development opportunities for teachers that increase teacher agency and collaboration while making the work of teaching transparent to others in the profession. Teachers are already trying to pursue this style of learning. Our challenge is to find ways to help them realize it.

**Commentary**

**The Kind of Professional Development We Need**

*By Larry Ferlazzo*

**QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE DO’S AND DON’TS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?**

It’s not unusual for teachers to groan—internally or externally—when the topic of professional development is discussed at our schools. Many of us have had unhelpful and often insulating PD experiences.

**RESPONSE FROM RICK WORMELI**

Rick Wormeli is a long-time teacher, consultant, and writer living in Herndon, VA. He can be reached at rwormeli@cox.net. His recently released book, *Crazy Good Stuff I Learned about Teaching* is now available from Association for Middle Level Education. He can be reached at rwormeli@cox.net and on Twitter at @rickwormeli2:

“In a time when so many advocate for restructured schools, for greater decision autonomy for teachers, and for connecting the schools more intimately with homes and communities, it is more important than ever that teachers have the capacity to appraise their actions, evaluate their work, anticipate and control consequences, incorporate new theory and research into practice, and possess the skills and understanding needed to explain their work to other teachers, and to students and their parents...These reflective capacities are not innate to human beings, nor are they acquired quickly. They are not acquired during a planning period sandwiched somewhere between classes, or during evening "mini-
Here’s What, So What, Now What is one of the great formats for teachers to use when giving descriptive feedback to students: “Here’s what I noticed about your work...”, “So this means you understand how to... and the differences between...,” and “Now, let’s create the next steps in your process...” Another effective format for descriptive feedback, Point-and-Describe, comes from Fay and Funk’s Love & Logic books: “I noticed you had your notes on the left side of the double-entry journal so you had quick access to that information as you worked through the problems on the right side.” Descriptive feedback in many assessment books consists of three parts: identifying the learning goal, determining where a student is operating in relation to that goal, and identifying what the teacher and student need to do in order to close the gap between the two.

In each of these techniques we focus on decisions students make and the outcomes of those decisions, not so much the quality of their work. This is much less threatening, and it allows students to internalize the feedback and use it, resulting in maturation and higher quality work. Instead of, “Nicely organized project,” we observe, “I noticed you decided to control for salinity factors first in this project. Tell me more about that decision.” There’s no judgment here, as judgment slows reflection and learning. Observing what decisions were made and their impact on the intended course helps students retain autonomy: they can change decisions and achieve different results.

Of course, we want teachers to provide descriptive feedback to their students, so we train them on these techniques, then sit back and watch them fly.

Except they don’t.

A few teachers give descriptive feedback an initial try, then run out of steam, returning to their lessons devoid of descriptive feedback. What went wrong? They were given the specific tools to use with students, and they clearly understood their value.

Most likely, the teachers weren’t committed to descriptive feedback because they never experienced its positive benefits personally. Teachers are more inclined to provide descriptive feedback and other successful teaching practices to their students when they experience those same practices themselves. When teachers write reflectively and make better decisions as a result, they can’t wait to help students write and reflect in class.

Teachers are committed to a fit lifestyle, they are apt to include such thinking and activities in their work with students. When teachers feel the benefits of helpful and emotionally safe feedback from colleagues and administrators and they improve their teaching as a result, they are excited to offer those positive feedback experiences to students. And even better, they are empathetic with their students’ experiences, knowing how to frame feedback in constructive ways students hear and use.

Want teachers to differentiate instruction? Then differentiate their professional development and describe the behind-the-scenes planning of it. Want teachers to incorporate more technology? Then incorporate more technology in interactions and help teachers experience the positives that come with it. Want them to conduct evidence-based assessments with students? Then be evidence-based in all teacher evaluations.

Helping teachers experience the practices we want them to provide students is a powerful element of any professional development (PD) program. No matter how wonderful it is, however, relying on only one element or vehicle for PD is insufficient and frustrating for everyone involved. In addition, lifting a PD template from another school and putting it in play exactly “as is” in our own school without tweaking it for the unique needs of our own community rarely works. Just as we ask of our teachers, we’ll need to provide flexible and diverse PD, if we want to be helpful.

So far, my comments are written from the building leader’s perspective, but the best professional development is orchestrated by the teacher. It’s rare for a large and lumbering school division or school to respond completely to the specific needs and background of any one teacher. Professional development is not done to teachers, it’s done with teachers, and ultimately, teachers are in charge of their own development, not the school. Anything we can do to help teachers build and direct their own training is a plus. Yes, the school leader can provide feedback and visionary direction, but it is at the teacher level where new initiatives and PD gain traction. Great building leaders facilitate, urge, and, as needed, incentivize teachers to take ownership of their own development.

Effective professional development is 24-7. Seriously, every time the faculty gathers face to face or on-line, we should anticipate professional development through discourse, idea exchange, sharing articles or lecture notes, listening to a guest speaker, observing and critiquing others’ lessons, analyzing data, contemplating the latest research report, participating in an on-line discussion, or by visiting a helpful website. It’s not something we compartmentalize into, “I only do professional development on the third Thursday of each month.” Those who embrace the 24-7 mindset explore potential research and ideas on-line, subscribe to professional journals, ask for professional critique, and seek the opinion of respected colleagues all on their own, without having to be asked, and on any and all days of the week. They quickly grow in effectiveness and they rediscover why they went into education in the first place. It’s survival, too: Participating in regular PD helps us cope with the inane, politicized, and sometimes harmful, education practices imposed upon us by those untrained in classroom instruction.

Borrowing and paraphrasing from a piece I wrote for the Association for Middle Level Education book, The Collected Writings (So Far), if we want our children to be intelligent and compassionate world citizens, we must provide exceptionally good instructional practices in our classrooms, and that takes vigilant commitment to teacher training. School districts cannot cloister teachers, preventing them from attending professional development experiences because they are afraid that a day out of the classroom equates to one less percentage point on a standardized test. In truth, ongoing professional development for teachers does more to improve student achievement than do state and provincial exams. Teachers who are given the tools to succeed with students are more committed and effective than those who feel unsupported in their learning and practice. Educators who have access to new knowledge, enriched professional roles, and ongoing collegial work, feel more efficacious in gaining and applying the knowledge they need to teach well.

As professionals, we have to ensure that we’re not left with just the information we were told when preparing to be teachers. As neophytes, did we fully understand the relevance of our professors’ wisdom? Could we put our learning in the context of being in the classroom full time? Does the information on learning, class management, and cognitive science from even just a few years ago enable us to teach students effectively today? Breakthroughs are happening all the time, and we are self-renewing experts on how the mind learns. (Wormeli, 2013)

While there are many elements to successful professional development, I’ve never found one that universally works with all teachers in all situations. We’ll have to think systemically about PD and not rely on one avenue for the PD thoroughfare. Let’s take a look at the possibilities, recognizing that we need to use at least five or six of these in the course of a school year in order maintain healthy professional growth:

Follow-up Experiences: Effective professional development occurs best with follow-up support and interaction that follows the initial experience. This can come in many
forms: a presentation or book study followed by classroom observation and analysis; peer observation of lessons followed by peer analysis; a study group such as Professional Learning Communities, Teacher Action Research Teams, Critical Friends groups; on-line community interaction regarding a particular topic or study; ongoing e-mail correspondence with the presenter/author; an initial presentation followed by a return of the presenter to the school a week or month later to answer questions and focus on the first steps of a concept’s implementation.

**Stand Alone Presentations:** These are still worth doing. We may not have time or money to invite a presenter back for 10 follow-up sessions, but one day with him or her can yield great catalysts for those professional processing and application experiences down the road. We can listen and watch the compelling presentation, then read his or her book or simply try the ideas and analyze their merits with colleagues. Thousands of teachers each day are persuaded to stop ineffective practices, then inspired to use highly effective practices -- and given the practical tools to use them -- by sitting in 75-minute concurrent sessions at conferences or attending a stand-alone seminar provided by their school district. Some school divisions prohibit teachers from attending one-day presentations or larger conferences, however, because there are no specific follow-up experiences provided by the speaker or conference organizers. This is short-sighted: Won’t some new knowledge be better than no knowledge at all? Will the school division pay for all that follow-up training? What if the speaker is quite good and his schedule is already filled for the year ahead - Isn’t one day with the dynamic thinking worth it, if we can create our own follow-up interactions ourselves? If we can read one article and get five new ideas that work, imagine what a whole day with that author might yield! Follow-up experiences are powerful, but this doesn’t mean stand-alone presentations are feeble.

**Build Moral Imperative.** Charts, graphs, and longitudinal, empirical data are food for the intellect, but rarely do teachers change philosophy and practice unless there is a moral imperative to do so. Doug Reeves got me thinking about this decades ago, and he’s right: Most principals and teachers do not drop ineffective practices and embrace effective ones unless there is an element of morality or ethics at play. It gives a personal/professional cause that helps us confront what we swept under the rug or with which we grew complacent. We see with new eyes: Is it ethical to count homework 25% of the academic grade? What morality is involved in testing English Language Learners who know the content well but can’t express it in English accurately, and thereby, they fail the English version exam? Is it proper to prevent a student from being on the basketball team because he’s making D’s on the grade-level curriculum, but when working with developmentally appropriate curriculum for him, he’s making straight As and maintaining strong work habits? What are the ethics of giving the most challenging students in the school to the brand new teacher who has the least perspective and the smallest repertoire?

**Go for National Board Certification.** If you’re in the United States, this is the best PD experience most of us will ever have. It was for me. To hold our practice up to the scrutiny of esteemed colleagues from multiple education groups is an amazing experience. ‘Want to be a highly accomplished, reflective practitioner with a strong voice in education decisions and considered a true professional? Then visit www.nbpts.org today and start the process.

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