



Leadership for Student Learning

The School Board's Role
in Creating School Districts
Where All Students Succeed





Making Professional Development Relevant and Useful

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“The purpose of staff development is not just to implement isolated instructional innovations; its central purpose is to build strong collaborative work cultures that will develop the long-term capacity for change.”

— Michael Fullan

Overview

To hone in on improving academic instruction, districts that make great gains in achievement revamp professional development so it is meaningful, relevant and based on research.

The school board is critical in accomplishing this, as the board sets the expectations for professional development, provides supports and resources, and monitors implementation of instructional strategies gained through the professional development.

Lessons from Great Gains School Districts

Professional development is a common theme in studies of districts that are making significant gains in achievement.

Highlights of the studies include:

- **Districts adopted new approaches to professional development.** To varying degrees, they all rejected the traditional, one-time workshop approach to developing teacher skill. Instead, they implemented coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction, using research-based principles of professional development. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs; based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data; and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning, including a network of instructional experts. *(Source: Beyond Islands of Excellence)*
- **Districts provided professional development and support for consistent implementation of key strategies throughout the district.** The districts used focused, intensive professional development programs to show teachers how to use curricula effectively. The professional development included teacher coaches who could model lessons and critique instructional practice; several days of training for all teachers; common planning time and grade-level meetings; and more extensive training for lead teachers. *(Source: Foundations for Success/Great City Schools)*
- **Extensive staff development opportunities by both districts and schools ensured that the knowledge base on improving teaching got into the hands of teachers.** Staff development typically focused on district initiatives, such as early reading instruction or classroom instruction. Several of the districts were incorporating research about the teaching of reading in the development of their own programs and in the staff development they provided to teachers. Teachers were also being supported in their efforts to increase their repertoire of instructional strategies. Some of this assistance was provided through time spent in team or grade-level meetings discussing instruction, time allocated to focusing on district priorities and goal-setting, some by training and workshops, and some by providing master teachers to model lessons. *(Source: High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems)*

- **Leaders in the successful school districts devoted substantial amounts of time and resources to helping teachers develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary in order to improve instruction for all groups of students.** They also devoted substantial time and resources to helping administrators learn to support teachers. Dozens of examples were evident of ways these districts built the capacity of people to contribute to and lead the transformation underway in the districts. *(Source: Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts)*

Teachers in high-impact high schools are more likely to have a say in the content of professional development than their peers at average-impact schools. They reported taking part in teacher committees that make such decisions. *(Source: Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground)*

Why Professional Development Works: What the Experts Say

Many carefully designed research studies over the past 25 years have shown that teacher learning through quality professional development can lead to enhanced teaching and learning. But to be effective in improving achievement, the studies show that professional development must have several key components, described below.

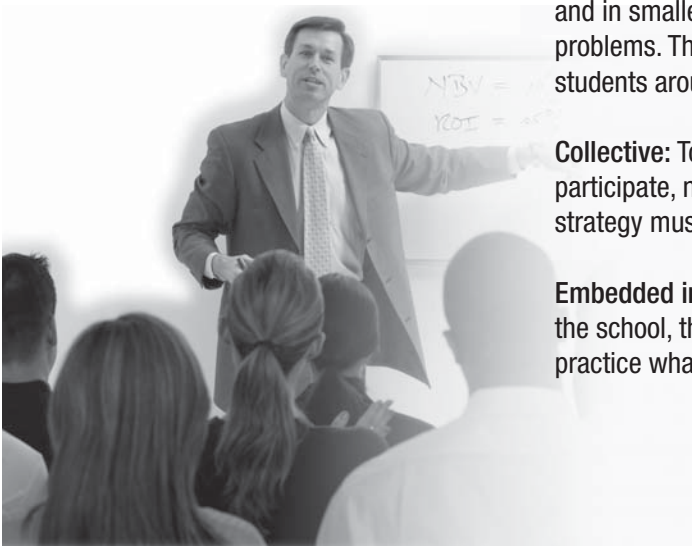
Grounded in student need in an academic content area, such as reading, math or science: This content area is selected based on data that shows a real student learning need. The entire staff engages in an initiative to improve instruction around that area of need, usually by studying and receiving training in a specific teaching strategy or model.

Research-based: The most effective efforts focus on teaching strategies backed by research that shows those strategies have proven effective in producing higher student achievement in other school districts over time and with students with similar needs.

Collaborative and ongoing: This type of professional development requires an ongoing study of teaching and learning throughout the school year, not just one-shot sessions or separate, unconnected projects or workshops. Teachers meet as whole faculties and in smaller teams on a regular basis to learn, study data, plan lessons and solve problems. Their goal is to improve their daily work to advance the achievement of students around the district goals for student learning.

Collective: To see widespread improvement in teaching and learning, all teachers must participate, not just a small group or subset. The teaching practice or instructional strategy must become part of the toolbox of teachers throughout the system.

Embedded in the system: There must be a structure, embedded in the everyday life of the school, that ensures that teachers can acquire the skill and knowledge they need, practice what they learn and then reflect on the results.



Chapter 4: Making Professional Development Relevant and Useful

Includes effective training processes: For a teacher to learn a new behavior and effectively apply it in the classroom, several steps are involved:

Theory: Understanding the principles behind new skills and strategies.

Demonstration: Observing an expert in action, modeling the new skill.

Practice: Practicing the new behavior in a safe context, such as a classroom or in front of a coaching partner.

Collaboration/Coaching: Trying out the skill with peer coaching and support in the classroom.

It's important that formal training be provided by an expert trainer—someone for whom this teaching strategy is a well-developed skill, not someone who has just read about it or been to a workshop. Unless all of the training components are in place, it's highly unlikely teachers will actually be able to effectively transfer what they learn into actual classroom practice.

Led broadly: This kind of professional development requires such complex, persistent efforts that it's unlikely to succeed without sustained leadership at all levels of the district—the board/superintendent team, teacher leaders, principals and other administrators.

Connected: The program doesn't stand alone. It must be aligned with other foundations of school improvement such as goals, standards, curriculum and assessments.

Evaluated: The results are monitored by changes in teacher knowledge and skills and improvements in student learning. The guiding questions are: Are teachers effectively implementing their new skills in the classroom? Are students learning more as a result?

WHAT IT TAKES TO IMPACT CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Training Components and Attainment of Outcomes
(Percent of Participants)

Components	Outcomes		
	Knowledge	Skill (Strong)	Transfer (Strong Classroom Implementation)
Study of Theory	10	5	0
Demonstrations	30	20	0
Practice	60	60	5
Peer Coaching	95	95	95

Staff development that includes only study of theory, demonstrations or practice outside the classroom rarely transfers to implementation of a new instructional skill for teachers in the classroom. “Peer coaching” brings a 95 percent classroom implementation of the new teaching skill. It's important to note that “peer coaching” is defined as practice in the classroom, along with lesson planning and collaboration with peers as teachers improve their practice and gauge the effect on students.

Joyce, Bruce and Showers, Beverly. *Student Achievement Through Staff Development*. 3rd Edition. ASCD. 2002.

Reality Check: Why Professional Development is Hard

Professional development systems that change achievement are still relatively rare. Authors Tom Corcoran, Susan Fuhman and Carol Belcher describe most of today's systems as "an unfocused menu of workshops, courses and awareness sessions" with little or no follow-up support and little if any attempts to monitor implementation.

During staff development, teachers are learning and applying significant, new instructional skills—and monitoring their impact on student learning. Unless all of the components above (study, demonstration, practice, coaching, supported by leadership, evaluation, data-oriented academic goals, etc.) are successfully implemented, the chance of impacting classroom instruction—and thereby student achievement—are small. And implementing them well takes a significant commitment of staff time. Staff development researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers comment in their book, *Student Achievement through Staff Development*, "In many of the jurisdictions where we work, at least in the beginning, the time for staff development was only three or four days a year; the districts were comfortable until they found that 10 or 12 days a year is a minimum if practice is to change enough to generate student effects."

That intensity and time commitment are among the reasons districts must often narrow the focus of staff development to a goal in a specific academic content area—successful implementation in a way that impacts achievement—means you cannot tackle everything at once. (See Chapter 3 on goal-setting for more details.)

Why Professional Development Matters



Quality professional development unlocks the doors of the classroom instruction—it drives the district to focus on the heart of improved instruction. But it does so in a way that honors teachers as professionals: working together, studying data, coaching each other, problem solving together—all around student needs and district goals.



How has professional development changed me as a teacher?

We asked a teacher who has experienced professional development that results in increased student learning to share her reflections.

“I had always prided myself in the fact that I am the kind of teacher that challenges her students while at the same time allowing them the time to learn and grow. However, I see now that even so, I was limiting my students. I know now that there is no cap to what individuals can learn whether they be children or adults. I am enjoying learning and growing with my students. The scientific research-based strategies that we are

learning in professional development are evident every day in my classroom.

I am more responsible as a teacher. I understand learning and teaching more clearly and I look at student learning differently. Our building is focused on one area of learning—reading comprehension. That focus has allowed optimal learning to occur and the transfer from workshop to workplace is more evident. As a classroom teacher and as a staff, we look at student data, analyze it, and use it to guide our instruction and our professional development. We study the theory behind our learning, watch demonstrations, and plan and practice lessons with our colleagues. We, in turn, apply our new learning daily in our classrooms. We have technical assistance from our AEA and the reading team from the Department of Education. We align instruction and curriculum to student achievement.

I have control of my own learning. I get to help plan and deliver good professional development. That's exciting to me as a teacher.

My experiences in this form of professional development have helped me to believe that all kids can learn. Every day we are learning more—all to help students learn skills and strategies to help them become lifelong learners.”

—Darlys, an Iowa elementary school teacher



Learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Research: School Boards and Professional Development

Lighthouse Study #1 Comparing Boards in High- and-Low Achieving Districts

In *high-achieving districts*, school board members described staff development activities in the district and could describe the link between teacher training and board or district goals for students. Board members emphasized the focus of staff development as a collective effort to meet student learning needs. They expressed a belief that staff development could make a difference and that their staff was capable of learning new skills.

In *low-achieving districts*, board members described staff development as chosen by individual teachers or as required for teacher certification. Board members knew there was a budget for staff development, but were unsure whether there was a plan for staff development. Board members made frequent disparaging remarks about staff development, both as an expense of time and as an ineffective strategy for changing or improving teacher practice. The board members questioned whether staff could learn new techniques or would even try.

Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000



Lighthouse Study #2 Action Research with Five Board/Superintendent Teams 'On the Journey'

"It's been very rewarding to us as a board to see how the teachers have come on and understood and realized that all of our professional development is focused on reading comprehension. They don't come to professional development days and wonder what we're going to do this year, or what's the latest flash in the pan now. They know that when they come to professional development it's going to be all about reading comprehension, strategies, what can we do to improve that in our school."

—Board Member,
Lighthouse Study #2

In all Iowa Lighthouse districts, one of the most critical components of the board's leadership for higher student achievement involved requiring and supporting effective professional development. After studying research-based characteristics of effective professional development, each board worked with their superintendent and district leadership team to support districtwide professional development aligned with the focus area.

Through studying research and case studies of effective professional development, the boards learned what is needed to support it and took several actions to ensure that those supports were in place. For example, during the budget process, four boards approved a calendar that created additional time for training and for teachers to meet two or four times a month in study teams to plan, practice and debrief lessons, to read and reflect on research and best practices, to gather, organize and analyze data related to students and instruction, and other issues—all related to the key initiative(s) the districts were implementing in the primary area of focus. The boards received information about the work of study teams several times during the year in work sessions with their district leadership teams.

In three of the Lighthouse sites, the board developed a policy to embody these characteristics, identifying five outcomes that the board will expect from professional development activities in the future:

1. Achievement improving for all students and the learning gaps among subgroups of students narrowing with a minimum standard of performance at or above grade level.
2. Students integrating strategies into their own learning (learners that know how to learn.)
3. All educators having improved instructional skills/strategies in the focus area identified for improving student learning.
4. All educators having a clear understanding of what the expected performance of instructional strategy/skill looks like and frequently monitoring their practice to determine implementation progress.
5. Administrators actively leading teachers' instructional improvement.

The expectations were shared in many settings with administrators and staff and provided a structure for district's improvement work. Progress reports from district leadership teams or principals to the board/superintendent team are framed around the outcomes defined in board policy.

Iowa School Boards Foundation, Preliminary Report, 2007





Mapping Your Board's Journey

Consider these guideposts to develop your board/superintendent team's leadership around professional development.

Roles of the Board

Guideposts

Setting Clear Expectations

Through policy, send a clear message that the priority for your district's professional development is to improve teaching and learning.

Use board policy to send the message that the priority for district-sponsored professional development is to align with academic improvement goals, be selected based on evidence that it has worked elsewhere, and will result in measurable improvements in student learning. At the same time, check related policies or documents, such as master contracts, to remove conflicts and ensure alignment. Build the board team's knowledge about this important issue by learning more about the research on effective professional development as you develop a policy for your district.

Creating Conditions for Success

Provide the time and resources to get the job done.

The board makes key decisions that affect the capacity of the district to deliver professional development. The annual school calendar—generally approved by boards in early spring for the next school year—should provide a clear indication of whether your staff will have the time as part of their regular work day or week to engage in study, training, practice and coaching around the new skill. In addition, your budget decisions will affect whether the district has funds to pay substitute teachers to release leadership team members for their work, or funds to hire an expert trainer if one is not available locally through your area education agency.

Be willing to bring in the help your staff needs.

Delivering professional development around a powerful instructional strategy is technical work which very few school districts can accomplish without help. If your staff already knew what to do, they would be doing it! Be willing to bring in needed skills and the objective voice of an external partner, such as a consultant or your area education agency. They have the ability to “push,” and a connection with the expert trainers or technical expertise.

Holding the System Accountable to Expectations

Review and discuss progress regularly with staff leaders.

Make progress on the district's professional development plan a part of your board agenda at regular intervals. Use that time to stay abreast of training sessions, to review examples and summaries of data your staff will be collecting as teachers practice and apply the strategies in their classrooms, discuss challenges with administrators and teacher leaders, discuss achievement data, and commend staff members for tackling the work.

Chapter 4: Making Professional Development Relevant and Useful

<i>Roles of the Board</i>	<i>Guideposts</i>
<i>Holding the System Accountable, continued</i>	<p>Keep the focus on the bottom line: student learning. Evaluate the effectiveness of professional development not only based on implementation, but by changes in student learning. Is the program producing the expected results in student learning?</p>
<i>Building Collective Will</i>	<p>Take a stand with parents and the community. Changing dismissal times and school calendars as you build in time for professional development can cause disruptions for parents who have established after-school care arrangements for their children. It can also cause community members to ask questions if they don't understand the changes. Your board must be visible and vocal in helping parents and community members understand the role staff development plays in improving results for students.</p>
<i>Learning Together as a Board Team</i>	<p>Build your understanding about the instructional improvement strategy your staff selects. In alignment with your district's primary academic improvement goal, your staff members will select one, or perhaps a few, powerful teaching strategies to learn about and apply through professional development. Talk with staff leaders at the board table about the strategies, how they work to help students learn, and what evidence shows they will work for your staff. Your board's understanding of these strategies—and what it takes for teachers to be successful in applying them—is critical in guiding the decisions and work outlined below.</p>



Guideposts for Superintendents

“Successful superintendents must ensure that every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so that every student achieves. They recognize that investing in the continuous improvement of their staff is among their most important decisions because that is the best tool they have for ensuring that every student experiences great teaching every day. Excellent superintendents also recognize that they must model the value of continuous improvement by being continuous learners themselves.”

— *Stephanie Hirsh, executive director,
National Staff Development Council*



It's really common sense:
**It takes time and effort to become
an expert at anything.**

Add to teachers' toolbox through professional
development.