

# **Leading edge: The best staff development is in the workplace, not in a workshop**

By Rick DuFour

*Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2004 (Vol. 25, No. 2)

Copyright, National Staff Development Council, 2004. All rights reserved.

Most schools and districts have created an artificial distinction between working and learning. They operate in a way that suggests teachers work (teach) 180 or so days a year and learn (attend programs) on four or five days each year set aside for professional development. School leaders must end this distinction between working and learning and create conditions that enable staff to grow and learn as part of their daily or weekly work routines.

The traditional notion that regarded staff development as an occasional event that occurred off the school site has gradually given way to the idea that the best staff development happens in the workplace rather than in a workshop. When teachers work together to develop curriculum that delineates the essential knowledge and skills each student is to acquire, when they create frequent common assessments to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, when they collectively analyze results from those assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses, and when they help each other develop and implement strategies to improve current levels of student learning, they are engaged in the kind of professional development that builds teacher capacity and sustains school improvement.

Job-embedded staff development, by definition, will move the focus of professional learning to the school site. It is critical, however, that leaders understand that simply shifting to site-based staff development does not ensure improved learning for either adults or students. Site-based staff development can be, and often is, ineffective.

Leaders can increase the likelihood that site-based staff development will enhance the school's capacity to improve student learning if they address four questions.

## **1. Does the professional development increase the staff's collective capacity to achieve the school's vision and goals?**

Schools' tradition of individual teacher autonomy has worsened the traditional approach to staff development. This approach is based on the premise that schools will improve if individual teachers are encouraged to pursue professional growth opportunities that reflect their personal interests. Thus, the goal becomes providing a potpourri of options to reflect the diverse interests of a staff.

Developing individual teachers' knowledge and skills is important but not sufficient. The challenge facing schools is expanding the ability of a team of teachers to achieve goals for all their students and developing the ability of the entire faculty to move the school toward its vision. Leaders should insist that site-based professional development represent a focused, coherent effort to develop the collective capacity of school personnel to solve problems and sustain continuous improvement.

## **2. Does the school's approach to staff development challenge staff members to act in new ways?**

Effective professional development will do more than help a staff acquire new knowledge

and skills. It will push the staff to act in new ways. Teachers in professional learning communities are expected to go beyond reading the same article from a professional journal or attending the same workshop. They are expected to work together to apply new knowledge in the context of their school. They understand that improving the school means improving the practices of the people within the school.

Therefore, they work together to implement and assess the impact of new strategies for achieving their goals. Building shared knowledge is a critical element in professional development, but shared knowledge will improve schools only when people apply that knowledge. Furthermore, it is only when a staff begins to apply new learning that teachers will come to the deeper level of understanding that enables them to adapt new practices to their own setting.

### **3. Does the school's approach to staff development focus on results rather than activities?**

Many schools seem to approach staff development as if there is a prize for presenting the most new programs. When called on to provide evidence of the quality of their site-based staff development initiatives, they point to the number of topics covered, the number of faculty who attended workshops, or the level of satisfaction participants express. The real test of staff development, however, is whether "it alters instructional behavior and practices in ways that benefit students" (Sparks, 1994). Leaders must help schools shift their emphasis from amassing programs and projects to creating a collaborative culture in which teachers work together to improve student learning. Leaders who assess site-based staff development by asking how many teachers have been trained in "whole language" or "constructivist teaching" are asking the wrong question. The best way for leaders to help schools focus on what matters is by asking the question, "What evidence can you provide that staff are helping more students achieve at higher levels?"

### **4. Does the school's approach to staff development demonstrate a sustained commitment to achieving important goals?**

One of the challenges of leadership is to bring coherence to the myriad pressures and initiatives bearing down on schools. Leaders bring coherence to organizations when they establish clear goals, coordinate efforts to achieve those goals, and sustain the effort over an extended period of time. In her study of innovation in the business world, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983) found one of the most common causes of a failed initiative was that leaders had given up on it too soon. Nearly 20 years later, Jim Collins (2001) arrived at a similar conclusion in his study of successful companies. He found that, inevitably, successful innovation was the result of patient, persistent, sustained effort over time rather than a short-term, groundbreaking program.

The shortness of most staff development programs is the opposite of the kind of sustained commitment needed to embed change within the school's culture. It takes time for a change initiative to take root within the culture of any organization, and until the initiative takes root, it is extremely fragile and subject to regression. Dennis Sparks advises that the key to school improvement is sustained effort over three to five years in which the entire staff seeks incremental annual improvements related to important school goals.

Leaders who hope to foster powerful site-based staff development in their schools may consider these tips:

**Recognize that you will never build a collaborative culture simply by inviting or encouraging staff to work together.** Create structures that require teachers to work together, and build time for that work into the school day and annual calendar. The structures and culture of the school should resonate with the message that collaboration is nondiscretionary; it is the way we do things around here.

**Ensure that teams focus on learning by calling on them to respond to the following questions for every unit of instruction:** What is it we want all students to know and be able to do as a result of this unit? How will we know when each student has demonstrated proficiency? What will we do to address the needs of students who initially have difficulty mastering the intended learning? If the team's work does not address these critical questions, there is little reason to anticipate the changes in practice that lead to improved results.

**Insist that every team establish norms** or protocols to clarify their commitments for how they will work together.

**Insist that every team develop** and pursue a student achievement goal that is measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound, and aligned with school and/or district goals.

**Provide every team** with timely, user-friendly, relevant data and information that will allow its members to assess the impact of their various improvement strategies.

**Monitor the teams' work** by reviewing both the products they generate at each step of the process and the progress they make toward their student achievement goals.

**Celebrate the teams' progress** and be prepared to confront teams or individuals who are not honoring this collaborative approach to continuous improvement.

**Solicit feedback from teams** about the resources and training they need to become more proficient in this collaborative process.

It is clear that job-embedded, site-based professional development offers the best venue for educators' ongoing learning. It is equally clear, however, that leaders can and must play a pivotal role in ensuring that the staff development program of any school is designed to achieve the objective of higher levels of learning for both its adults and its students.

## References

**Collins, J. (2001).** *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap...and others don't.* New York: Harper Business.

**Kanter, R.M. (1983).** *The change masters: Innovation and entrepreneurship in the American corporation.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

**O'Neil, J. (1995, April).** On schools as learning organizations: A conversation with Peter Senge. *Educational Leadership, 52(7), 20-23.*

**Sparks, D. (1994, Fall).** A paradigm shift in staff development. *JSD, 15(4), 26-29.*

## About the Author

**Rick DuFour** is an educational consultant. You can contact him at 465 Island Pointe Lane, Moneta, VA 24121, (540) 721-4662, fax (540) 721-0382, e-mail: [rdufour@district125.k12.il.us](mailto:rdufour@district125.k12.il.us).