Teaching the Teachers: At a Glance
Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability

With 46 states and the District of Columbia climbing on board, the looming Common Core State Standards are shaping up to be one of the largest educational reforms in recent history. The academic benchmarks for math and English Language Arts represent a retreat from the traditional rote, fact-based style of instruction toward teaching that fosters critical thinking and problem solving among students. But research shows that teaching for critical thought isn’t widespread in our classrooms (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand et al., 1999; Kane and Stainger, 2012). Meeting the demands of the Common Core means teaching teachers new approaches to instruction; in other words, reform demands effective professional development.

Recent education reforms have urged teachers to foster collaboration, debate and reflection among students, in order to develop cognitive processes like those called for in the new standards. Ironically, districts rarely apply these same learning techniques to developing teachers. At the same time, teacher’s performance is increasingly tied to their students. This is a disparity that must be corrected.

Professional development can no longer just be about exposing teachers to a concept in a one-time workshop, or giving teachers basic knowledge about a teaching methodology. Instead, professional development in an era of accountability requires a fundamental change in a teacher’s practice that leads to increases in student learning in the classroom.

Effective Professional Development

In order to use professional development as a vehicle for improvement, districts need to know how teachers learn new skills. Districts have typically assumed teacher learning is straightforward, with teachers merely needing to be presented with information about effective teaching strategies. But research suggests teachers’ learning process is more complex than that.

Most teachers only experience traditional, workshop-based professional development, even though research shows it is ineffective. Over 90 percent of teachers participate in workshop-style training sessions during a school year (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This stands in stark contrast to teachers’ minimal exposure to other forms of professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Despite its prevalence, the workshop model’s track record for changing teachers’ practice and student achievement is abysmal. Short, one-shot workshops often don’t change teacher practice and have no effect on student achievement (Yoon et al, 2007; Bush, 1984).

The largest struggle for teachers is not learning new approaches to teaching but implementing them. The reason traditional professional development is ineffective is that it doesn't support teachers during the stage of learning with the steepest learning curve: implementation. In the same way that riding a bike is more difficult than learning about riding a bike, employing a teaching strategy in the classroom is more difficult than learning the strategy itself. In several case studies, even experienced teachers struggled with a new instructional technique in the beginning (Ermeling, 2010; Joyce and Showers, 1982). In fact, studies have shown it takes, on average, 20 separate instances of practice, before a teacher has mastered a new skill, with that number increasing along with the complexity of the skill (Joyce and Showers, 2002).

In order to truly change practices, professional development should occur over time and preferably be ongoing. During the implementation stage, initial attempts to use a new teaching strategy are almost certain to be met with failure, and mastery comes only as a result of continuous practice despite awkward performance and frustration in the early stages. Without support during this phase, it is highly unlikely that teachers will persevere with the newly learned strategy. Research bears this out. When professional development merely describes a skill to teachers, only 10 percent can transfer it to their practice; however, when teachers are coached through the awkward phase of implementation, 95 percent can transfer the skill (Bush, 1984; Truesdale, 2003). Therefore, if districts want real changes in teaching practice, they have to provide ample and ongoing support during
implementation. Studies show that effective professional development programs require anywhere from 50 to 80 hours of instruction, practice, and coaching before teachers arrive at mastery (French, 1997; Banilower, 2002; Yoon et al., 2007).

**Coaches/mentors are found to be highly effective in helping teachers implement a new skill.** In coaching, teachers work with a master educator before, during and after a lesson, getting feedback on their implementation of a newly learned teaching skill. Numerous studies have shown coaching to be successful at changing teacher practice and improving student learning (Showers, 1984; Slinger, 2004; Knight 2007; Batt, 2009; Stephens et al., 2007; Knight and Cornett, 2009). Before coaching, however, teachers need to get a solid foundation of knowledge about the teaching strategy. This presentation of knowledge should be active, not passive (Roy, 2005; Richardson, 1998). Further, modeling by the coaches has been shown to be very effective at helping teachers grasp a new teaching approach before they attempt implementation (Roy, 2005; Goldberg, 2002; Rice, 2001; Black, 1998; Licklider, 1997).

**Professional development is best delivered in the context of the teacher's subject area.** Regardless of whether teachers are working with coaches or in professional learning communities, teachers need to be working with the content they teach. Teachers don’t find professional development on generic topics useful (Peery, 2002; Redding and Kamm, 1999; Dunn and Dunn, 1998). However, professional development that focuses on teachers analyzing the specific skill and concept they’ll teach in their discipline is not only well-received by teachers, but has also been shown to improve both teacher practice and student learning (Bland de la Alas and Smith, 2007; Carpenter et al., 1989; Cohen and Hill, 2001; Lieberman and Wood, 2001; Merek and Methven, 1991; Saxe, Gearhart, and Nasir, 2001; Wenglinksky, 2000; McGill-Franzen et al., 1999; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

**Research on effective critical thinking strategies is lacking, but teachers don’t have to wait and can lead the way by establishing professional learning communities.** While there are several research-backed instructional strategies, the research base is still in its infancy. Therefore, schools need teachers to not just be implementers of effective teaching strategies, but also innovators of strategies that foster critical thinking. Many schools have done this through professional learning communities, communities of teachers in the same content area who create instructional innovations, support each other during the implementation stage, and reflect on the results. In essence, the community of teachers serves as coaches for each other. Research shows that effective professional learning communities can change teacher practice and increase student achievement (Dunne et al., 2000; Rosenholtz, 1989; Lous and Marks, 1998; Little, 1982; Wiley, 2002). In addition, several studies have found that student achievement is higher in schools with strong professional communities, where collective responsibility, collaboration and collegiality among teachers are fostered (Little, 1982; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Louis et al., 1996).

This summary excerpt is based on a report prepared for the Center for Public Education by Allison Gulamhussein.

Allison Gulamhussein is a doctoral student at George Washington University and a former high school English teacher. She was the spring 2013 policy intern for the Center for Public Education.

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